

Bearded Dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*) Care Plan

Bearded Dragons are terrestrial lizards from Australia. They can live up to 10 years and reach up to 60cm in length. Bearded dragons are ground dwellers, they will climb rocks and low branches. They are active during daylight hours.

Bearded Dragon

Bearded Dragons get their name from their ability to "puff out" a throat pouch that has prominent spikes formed from modified scales. This "beard" can also change color, becoming jet black and impressive.

In captivity, bearded dragons can live 7 to 10 years with proper care. They become sexually mature between 10 and 18 months.

Suitability as Pets

Bearded dragons will learn to tolerate routine handling. When handled on a daily basis, they seem to become more relaxed as time goes on, and cleaning the enclosure is simplified when the animal is docile.

One of the joys of caring for this species is its mellow but interactive nature. They rapidly establish a hierarchy and adapt to their caretakers. Extreme aggressive behaviour is rare in captivity. They are very curious and love to investigate.

Bearded dragons make wonderful pets. They are generally very docile, and usually take well to handling. They are curious and attentive to their surroundings. Interesting behaviors include arm waving, head bobbing, and digging.

Sexing & Reproduction

Bearded dragons are difficult to sex accurately when they are young. Experts may resort to "hemipenal eversion," pushing at the cloacal area to evert the male sex organs. This procedure can damage the lizard and is NOT recommended. Body proportions differ: males tend to have a larger head to body ratio, larger femoral pores, darker coloured beards and a thicker tail, whereas females have a large body with a medium head and are often smaller overall.

Beards are not limited to males; the females will show off their beards as well, in a very interactive communication.

Adults become sexually mature as early as 8 months and can usually be sexed then since the adult males have enlarged femoral pores (rounded pores on the undersurface of the thigh in a line above the femur bone). The external anatomy has subtle differences that can help you to determine gender.

Dragons have active courtship rituals and reproduce very well in captivity. The female will bury up to two dozen eggs, and will threaten you with gaping mouth if you try to pick up her eggs during the process, but afterwards offers no parental care.

Housing

Bearded Dragons need large secure vivariums with the correct temperature gradient and places to hide. It is essential that vivarium temperature and humidity are monitored to ensure that this lizard is living in the correct environment for the species.

Substrates such as sand, bark or wood chips and corn cobs should be avoided as they can be ingested causing fatal impactions. Newspaper is probably the easiest thing to use as it can be replaced regularly.

The vivarium should be spot-cleaned regularly and completely cleaned and disinfected every 2 months.

Lighting

Bearded dragons need ultraviolet B light for vitamin D synthesis and calcium metabolism. While this is best provided by access to natural sunlight, this is obviously not a practical option in Britain. Light sources such as Powersun (Zoomed) Iguana light, Reptisun (Zoomed) or Life-glo lights are the good alternatives. They must be replaced regularly as their UVB output declines rapidly after 6-9 months. A 12/12 hour day/night photoperiod is fine

Heating/ Temperature

The preferred optimum temperature zone (POTZ) is 24-32°C. To stimulate appetite and digest their food, bearded dragons should have access to a basking area that remains at 30-35°C for 12 hours a day. The rest of the enclosure should have a temperature gradient from 30-35°C at the hot spot to 24°C at the coolest area during the day. Vivarium temperatures can drop by a few degrees at night time but should not drop below 16°C (20°C for juveniles).

The temperature gradient can be achieved by placing a heat mat under or against the side of the vivarium at one end. Alternatively ceramic bulbs, spot lights or power plates can be used, although it is essential that heaters inside the vivarium are guarded to prevent direct contact by the animal. Some form of basking lamp should be provided whichever other heating methods are used. Use a thermostat to control the heat system if possible. Hot rocks are not recommended.

Furniture (Climbing and shelter)

Rocks or logs can be used to create hiding places or purpose built hide boxes can be used.

Provide branches to climb, rocks to bask upon, and shelter to hide in. Ideally a rock will be placed under the heat lamp. Hardy plants like sansevieria, aloe, palms, and cycads may be used.

Water /Humidity

Humidity should be 20-30% with access to an area of higher humidity during shedding (40-60%). This can be achieved by providing a small humidity chamber. This can be made out of a plastic ice cream or margarine tub containing damp vermiculite, moss or wet paper towels. A shallow water dish should be available and cleaned daily.

Diet / Feeding

Bearded dragons are omnivorous, eating a large proportion of insects. Crickets, mealworms, locusts, cockroaches and wax worms are all suitable. Bearded dragons are prone to dental disease if fed on very soft insects such as wax worms and crickets only – hard-bodied insects such as cockroaches and beetles are less likely to predispose to plaque accumulation. Adults may take an occasional pinky mouse.

A small amount of vegetable matter should be offered daily with components well mixed and in bite-sized pieces. This should also be regularly dusted with Nutrobal (Vetark). Suitable vegetables include dandelion (including flowers), clover, watercress, mustard cress, parsley, kohlrabi, escarole, collard, turnip greens, endive, Chinese leaves, carrot tops, green beans, peas (and pods), mange-tout, bean sprouts, grated carrot, sweet potato, peppers, and sweetcorn. Vegetables should be shredded, grated or finely chopped and mixed thoroughly together.

Adults should be fed every 1-2 days; juveniles require feeding twice daily with smaller prey items. When feeding juveniles, it is a good idea to place crickets in the fridge for a few minutes first, to slow them down. Remove any uneaten crickets from the vivarium.

As bearded dragons mature, the proportion of vegetable matter eaten should increase, so that an adult is eating 75% greens and vegetables and 25% insects.

Food Dusting/ Vitamin Supplementation

In order to ensure that the diet has a correct calcium : phosphorus ratio, prey insects should be gut-loaded with a product such as Bug-Grub (Vetark) for 48 hours before feeding. They should also be regularly dusted with a high calcium product such as Nutrobal (Vetark) before feeding. Juveniles should have their prey dusted daily whereas adults should have their prey dusted weekly.

Preventative Care & Disease Management

Always wash your hands (preferably with an antiseptic soap) before or after handling any reptile. For animals in veterinary environment we advise the use of disposable gloves (to control RAS).

Quarantine new reptiles for at least 3 months. During this time record normal patterns of eating, defaecating, weight gain and behaviour and have them examined by a vet.

It is a good idea to take along a fresh faecal sample so that the vet can check for the presence of gastrointestinal parasites.

Veterinary advice should be sought if your pet is not eating or producing faeces, is inactive, has swellings, particularly around the eyes, is losing weight or has a discharge from its eyes, nose or mouth.

Accidents and injuries can happen, both to the reptile and the reptile handler. Not only can bites happen, but also there are diseases that can be transmitted between animals - and that means between reptiles and humans.

Keepers should be ware of the prevention of reptile associated salmonellosis (RAS).

Good hygiene is essential, not only to your pet's health, but to your own.

Reptiles can be non- symptomatic carriers of Salmonella, bacteria that cause sometimes lethal food poisoning.

Children, the aged, and those who are immune-compromised are particularly susceptible to Salmonella from any source.

There are measures you can take to minimize risk:

- After handling your pet reptile, wash your hands with soap for at least 30 seconds, or use hand disinfectant.
- Disinfect any area you used to clean cages, dishes and do not use this area for food preparation.
- Use separate cleaning utensils, not the sponge you use to wash your own dishes.
- Reptiles are NOT recommended if you're pregnant or have a young child or an immuno-compromised person in your home.
- Don't kiss a reptile pet.