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## Bearded Dragon Care

### **INTRODUCTION**

Bearded dragons are native to Australia. They are very popular pets because they are social and easy to handle. They also have a wide range of fascinating behaviors. The average lifespan of a bearded dragon is 12-14 years, but with proper care and diet some can live over 20 years.

### **HOUSING**

**Cage** – Bearded dragons require a lot of room. The enclosure should be large enough for climbing, exploration, and basking. Glass aquarium tanks or lightweight plastic molded enclosures can be used. A single adult dragon needs at least 2x4 feet of floor space (the equivalent of a 75 gallon aquarium). Juvenile bearded dragons can be housed in a 10-20 gallon tank. Either very tall walls or a top to the enclosure is required to prevent the bearded dragon from escaping.

**Substrate** – The substrate should be safe and easy to clean. Commonly used examples are paper towels, butcher paper, newspaper, Repti-Carpet, Vinyl tile, fleece or tightly woven towels. Paper pulp products such as Carefresh can be used, but your bearded dragon should be fed in a separate container to avoid ingestion of the substrate. We do not recommend using sand, gravel, mulch, cat litter, or wood shavings due to risk of ingestion leading to impaction as well as irritation of the eyes and mouth.

**Cage Furniture** – Hide boxes should be provided in both the cool and warm sides of the enclosure. Other furniture such as large rocks, branches, and driftwood can be provided as climbing structures for your bearded dragon. Do NOT use heated rocks due to risk of thermal burns.

**Temperature** – The enclosure should be large enough to have a warm side and a cool side to allow your bearded dragon to regulate its temperature by changing its location. Digital thermometers rather than dial thermometers should be used for accuracy. The probe of the digital thermometer should be placed at the level of the animal rather than at the top of the enclosure. At least two thermometers should be used, one to measure the cool side and one the warm side. The basking side should reach up to 95-115°F and the cooler side should be about 75-80°F. A clear incandescent bulb, red bulbs, ceramic heating elements, or reptile under tank heating pads are often used as heat sources. Do NOT use heated rocks due to risk of burns. A nighttime temperature range should be between 65-75°F.

**Lighting** – It is imperative that a UVB light source be provided for 10-12 hours daily for proper Vitamin D production and calcium absorption. We recommend the long tube fluorescent lights (ZooMed Reptisun 10.0 Iguana). The light needs to be placed over a screen top (as plastic/glass blocks the emission) within 18 inches of your lizard. The light needs to be replaced every 6 months even if it still works as UVB production decreases over time.

**Cage mates** – Bearded dragons should be housed individually as they are very territorial and will often fight. Adult bearded dragons will also eat juveniles. If the tank is large enough, juveniles may be housed together temporarily. Make sure to provide several basking sites and hiding areas if you house more than one dragon together.

## **DIET**

**Vegetables** – Feed a variety of dark leafy vegetables, such as collard greens, endive, dandelion greens, mustard greens, escarole, watercress, and turnip greens. Butternut squash, acorn squash, green beans (no other types of beans), sugar snap peas, and okra can also be fed as regular treat foods. Kale, spinach, broccoli, cilantro, bok choy, swiss chard, parsley, and carrots can be fed occasionally. Lettuces are not recommended as they have very poor nutritional values. A salad can be made by chopping or shredding the greens. Spray the salad with water to increase water intake.

**Fruit** – Fruits (berries, melons, kiwi, papaya, mango) can be used to top the salad to increase interest, but should be used sparingly.

**Insects** – Insects should only be fed as treats. Insects should always be gut loaded. To do this, provide insects with a diet such as cricket food, rodent chow, or dry dog food. The primary insect used should be crickets or Dubia roaches as other insects (mealworms, giant mealworms, wax worms) are high in fat and should only be used occasionally. Please remove uneaten insects to prevent injury to your bearded dragon.

**Commercial diets** – Commercial/pelleted diets are not recommended for your bearded dragon

**Supplements** – Dust insects with a calcium/vitamin D3 supplement (with no added phosphorus) and multivitamin. We recommend the Repashy Calcium Plus powder.

## **WATER**

**Water Bowl** – Fresh water should be provided in a dish that is shallow enough for your dragon to climb into and large enough for them to fit in. Change the water daily as your dragon will likely defecate in the water.

**Misting** – Mist the enclosure and your dragon once a day with a spray bottle.

**Soaking** – Soak your dragon 2-3 times a week in a shallow warm water bath for 15-20 minutes to encourage drinking, improve hydration, and to help with shedding.

## **HANDLING**

Gently scoop up your dragon with your hand under its belly. They do not like to be held firmly, so let them rest in the palm of your hand with your fingers curled around them. If children are handling the bearded dragon, have them sit on the floor and hold it in their laps. Only allow them to handle the pet with adult supervision.

**Salmonellosis** – Reptiles are commonly carriers of Salmonella and are a potential source of infection to humans. We recommend washing your hands immediately after handling your dragon, cleaning the enclosure, or after coming into contact with fecal material.

## **HEALTH CARE**

We recommend a complete physical exam, atadenovirus testing, choanal culture, and fecal examination by an exotic animal veterinarian for all newly acquired pet bearded dragons. Thereafter, we recommend exams every 6 months and yearly choanal cultures and fecal exams.

## **COMMON MEDICAL PROBLEMS**

**Metabolic Bone Disease** – Inappropriate lighting and inappropriate calcium supplementation can lead to brittle or soft bones that can easily break. Signs include weakness, decreased appetite, swelling of the joints/legs, and twitching or tremors. If you notice any of these signs, please contact your veterinarian.

**Retained Shed** – Bearded dragons shed in pieces and sometimes the shed can be retained. Common places for retained shed are in the eyes and around legs, toes, and the tail. Signs include squinting or swelling of the leg, tail, or toes. If you notice any of these signs, please contact your veterinarian.

**Impaction** – Bearded dragons defecate fairly regularly. If they go for several days without defecating, they could potentially have a blockage in their intestinal tract. Please contact your veterinarian if your bearded dragon has not defecated for several days.

**Abscess** – Abscesses appear as firm lumps on your bearded dragon. They will need to be lanced and some need to be surgically removed.