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Colorado Reptile Humane Society's Guide to Caring For Bearded Dragons

General Information

Bearded dragons (*Pogona* species) are native to Australia and New Guinea. They live in arid open woodlands and semi-desert regions with hot days and cool nights. They are good climbers and like to bask on rocks and exposed branches in the mornings and afternoons. They spend the hottest part of the day underground. Bearded dragons are generally easy to handle, easy to socialize, and tolerant of humans.

The name "bearded dragon" comes from its flared throat that can turn black when it feels threatened or is defending its territory.

Bearded dragons are diurnal, active during the day and sleeping at night. They are omnivores and consume large amounts of insects, plants, fruits and flowers. After reaching adulthood, they fare better with less protein and more plant-based foods.

Habitat

A 40-gallon tank with a 36" x 18" footprint is the minimum size tank acceptable for a bearded dragon. 75 gallons (48" x 18") or larger is recommended. Bearded dragons do not require companionship and housing more than one per tank is not recommended.

Acceptable substrates are reptile carpet, newspaper, or paper towels. Beardies like to burrow, so using a shredded paper or recycled cardboard product will make them feel safe. Sand of any kind is not an acceptable substrate due to probable eye injury (including permanent blindness), skin damage, and risks associated with ingestion and impaction. Additionally, all particulate substrates (ground walnut shells, corn cobs, alfalfa) increase the potential for intestinal impactions requiring expensive veterinary procedures, including surgery.

Provide small limbs for climbing. Two hide boxes are needed: one in the warm end of the tank and one in the cool end. Keep a shallow bowl of fresh water available at all times for drinking. Change the water and thoroughly wash the bowl daily. Bearded dragons will enjoy a shallow soak weekly in warm water. A light misting will make the shedding process easier but the tank itself should never be damp.



The proper handling technique for a bearded dragon.



Temperature

Daytime temperatures should be 76-86°F (24-30°C) in the main part of the enclosure with a basking area ranging from 95-100°F (32-38°C). Night time temperatures can be in the low 70s (22°C) if the warm end remains around 80°F (27°C). These temperatures can be maintained with the use of heat mats, basking bulbs, or ceramic heat emitters.

Do not use hot rocks. They frequently malfunction, causing severe burns or death. Temperatures under light bulbs should be closely monitored. Bulbs greater than 100 watts should not be used due to excessive heat.

Lighting

Bearded dragons require about 12 hours of UVB light each day. This can be supplied by a UV-producing mercury vapor bulb, such as Mega-Ray. A one hundred watt mercury vapor bulb can produce enough UVB and heat for a 55-75 gallon tank if the temperature of your home is around 70 degrees. UVB fluorescent tubes such as the Zoo Med Reptisun 10.0 can also be used. Incandescent, wide spectrum and full spectrum lights can be used as a heat sources but do not provide UVB, which is vital for the metabolism of vitamin D3 in order to properly absorb calcium. Lack of proper UVB lighting can lead to calcium deficiency and serious disorders such as metabolic bone disease, or MBD. MBD is very common in captive beardies and causes crippling deformities, muscle weakness and digestive problems that may eventually lead to death.

In order to be effective, it is important to follow the manufacturer's recommended distance when placing the bulbs above the basking area. Some mercury vapor bulbs produce significant heat as well as UVB, so the temperature at the basking area must be carefully monitored and adjusted. UVB rays cannot pass through glass or plastic so there cannot be any type of covering between the bulb and the bearded dragon. Even a tight mesh screen top will reduce the amount of available UVB by 50%. These bulbs should be replaced every six months due to the degradation of the UVB output in the bulb, unless a UVB meter can be used to verify adequate output.

White lights should not be used at night as bearded dragons need darkness for proper sleep. Additional nighttime heat, if necessary in a cold house, can be provided with ceramic heat emitters, or an under-tank heat mat so as not to disturb their circadian (day/night) rhythm.

Maintenance

The enclosure should be spot checked for feces daily. Remove and replace soiled and wet portions of the substrate right away to prevent bacteria and fungus growth. Change the substrate and disinfect the enclosure with a 5% Chlorhex solution on a regular basis. Avoid cleansers such as Lysol or Pine-Sol as they may leave a toxic residue. Rinse the enclosure thoroughly with clear water after cleaning with any detergent or bleach solution. Always wash your hands thoroughly before and after handling your beardie and after cleaning the enclosure and accessories.



Wild bearded dragon in its native habitat displays defensive posture with flared beard.



Diet

CoRHS encourages a varied diet of crickets, zoophoba (commonly called “superworms”), waxworms, mealworms, collard and dandelion greens, shredded veggies such as squash, parsnips, green beans, and fruit. Adult bearded dragons should be fed greens and veggies every day and offered insects no more than twice a week. Too much protein (from crickets and worms) can cause kidney damage.

To increase the nutritional value of the crickets and worms, it is best to feed them (also called “gut-loading”) at least 24 hours before feeding to the bearded dragon. Information on the care and feeding of bugs can be found on CoRHS’s “Guide to the Care and Feeding of Bugs,” available at www.corhs.org/edcenter.html.

Brumation

Adult bearded dragons sometimes enter a stage of brumation, or winter shutdown, during the winter months. They become inactive and eat little. Basking lights should be reduced to 75-80 degrees and left on only eight to ten hours a day. For detailed information on brumation, visit: <http://www.beardeddragon.org/articles/brumation/?page=1>

Veterinary Care

Routine veterinary screening for newly-acquired bearded dragons is advised. With any sign of illness, we recommend a visit to your reptile veterinarian as soon as possible. Watch for cloudy eyes, swollen gums, nasal discharge, noisy breathing, and loss of appetite for extended periods.

To locate a recommended reptile veterinarian in Colorado, visit www.corhs.org/vets.html. Outside of Colorado, visit www.herpvetconnection.com.

For Further Reading

Melissa Kaplan’s Herp Care Collection
www.anapsid.org

Western New York Herpetological Society
www.wnyherp.org

The Bearded Dragon Manual

by Philippe de Vosjoli

Published by Advanced Vivarium Systems, 2001.

*This guide was updated in November 2009.
Please contact info@corhs.org for more information.*

