

Colorado Reptile Humane Society's

Guide to Caring for Bearded Dragons

General Info

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 this species 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 habitat is not recommended. Suggested substrates are reptile carpet, newspaper, paper towels, tile, or linoleum. 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.

- 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% Chlorhexidine Gluconate solution on a regular basis. Avoid cleansers such as



Wild Bearded Dragon (Pogona vitticeps) in its native habitat displaying a defensive posture with flared beard.

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.

- Providing plenty of enrichment items in the enclosure will provide your Beardie with mental stimulation and help them feel more secure. This may include limbs and branches for climbing, well stabilized rocks, and flagstone, and artificial plants. Two hide boxes are also 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. A light misting will make the shedding process easier, but the tank itself should never be damp.

- Soaking your Bearded Dragon in a container of shallow, lukewarm water once a week is recommended to ensure the animal is staying adequately hydrated. Sometimes, even when water is available in the enclosure, your Bearded Dragon may not be drinking on their own.

Temperature

Daytime ambient temperatures should be between 75 - 85°F in the enclosure, with a **basking area ranging from 95 -100°F**. Nighttime temperatures can be in the low 70s if the warm end remains around 80°F. These temperatures can be maintained with the use of heat mats or ceramic heat emitters. Temperatures under heat bulbs can be effectively maintained with the use of a thermostat. The thermostat sensor should be placed in the area the animal will be basking.



Lighting
UVB
 (Ultraviolet B) light should be provided to Bearded Dragons for about 12 hours each day. UVB 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 Bearded Dragons and causes crippling deformities, muscle weakness, and digestive problems that may eventually lead to death. In order for UVB lighting to be effective, it is important to follow the manufacturer's recommended distance when placing the bulbs above the basking area. Keep in mind, 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 to one year depending on the product recommendations.

UVB Bulbs

There are many UVB producing lights on the market that can vary in efficacy. At CoRHS we have found Arcadia D3+ Desert T-5 bulbs have the best UVB output. Zoomed T-5 bulbs or mercury vapor bulbs, such as Mega-Ray are also recommended. Mercury vapor bulbs can produce both UVB and daytime heat for an enclosure.

Ceramic heat bulbs are a good option for both nighttime and daytime heating. We strongly recommend them over red or black-light heat bulbs for nighttime heating. Colored heat bulbs can

disturb an animals sleep as much as daytime heat bulbs as they still produce a good deal of light.

Deep Heat Projector bulbs are another option for providing both daytime and nighttime heat. They are relatively new to the market, but are designed to more closely mimic heat produced from the sun, providing broad spectrum heat without creating pinpoint "hot spots" that can overheat the animal.

Recommended Heat/UVB combinations

Daytime	Nighttime
T-5 Fixture (UVB) & Heat Light	Ceramic or DHP bulb (Heat)
Mercury Vapor bulb (UVB & Heat)	Ceramic or DHP bulb (Heat)
T-5 Fixture (UVB) & DHP bulb (Heat)	DHP bulb (Heat)

Diet

CoRHS encourages a varied insect diet of Dubia roaches, Hornworms, Superworms and Waxworms; (recommendations for salad ingredients are included in an additional handout). Adult Bearded Dragons should be fed greens and veggies every day and offered insects 3 – 4 times a week. Too much insect protein can cause kidney damage in adult Bearded Dragons. To increase the nutritional value of feeder insects such as Dubia roaches and Superworms, 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 (similar to hibernation in mammals), 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

At any sign of illness, we recommend a visit to your reptile veterinarian as soon as possible. Watch for cloudy eyes, swollen limbs, nasal discharge, noisy breathing, long term stress coloration and behavior, 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.terrariumquest.com/reptile-vet-directory/

Saying Goodbye

Eventually, as with any beloved pet, we are required to make difficult decisions on their behalf. Old age unfortunately is inevitable, and at some point even the most well cared for animals will start to decline. Helping your Beardie move on with minimal pain, stress, or fear is part of responsible ownership, and the last gift you can give your companion.

Always consult your reptile veterinarian once you notice an ongoing decline in appetite and energy in an older (10+ years) animal. This can sometimes be accompanied by prolonged stress coloration and restless behavior. Humane euthanasia is inexpensive and causes minimal suffering.

Further Reading

- Reptifiles, www.reptifiles.com
- Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection, www.anapsid.org
- Western New York Herpetological Society, www.wnyherp.org



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