

Caring for Bearded Dragons

A bearded dragon can be a good choice for a pet reptile. These charismatic lizards from Australia are friendly and relatively easy to care for. They grow up to two feet in length and can live up to 10 years. If they are fed and housed properly, they can provide many years of companionship.

Biological Facts

- The inland bearded dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*) is native to rocky, semi-desert regions bordering forests in Australia.
- Life span in captivity: 8 to 10 years
- Size: 18 to 24 inches (45 to 61 cm) from nose to tail
- Weight: 10 to 18 oz (283 to 510 g)
- Color: light tan to dark brown (they can darken when threatened)
- Sexual maturity: 1 to 2 years of age
- Identifying features: adult males have a broader head, thicker tail, darker black beard during breeding season, and more prominent femoral pores (glandular openings along underside of the thighs) than females
- Egg laying: approximately 4 to 5 weeks after breeding
- Incubation: approximately 60 to 80 days when incubated at 82°F (27.7°C)
- Clutch size: 18 to 24 eggs; up to 100% hatchability is common

Behavior

- In captivity, bearded dragons are social and usually adapt well to human caretakers.
- They are diurnal (active during the day); however, in the wild, they spend the hottest part of the day in cool burrows.

Diet

- They are omnivorous and eat vegetables, fruits, flowers, insects, and small vertebrates.
- Hatchlings eat mostly small insects. As they grow, they will start to eat more vegetable matter.

- Their diet consists of 60% to 65% plant foods and 30% to 45% prey items.
 - Examples of plant foods in the diet are mustard greens, collard greens, turnip greens, kale, dandelion greens, zucchini, sweet potato, broccoli, peas, and grated carrots. Introduce greens and other vegetables from a young age to encourage acceptance in the diet.
 - Examples of prey items in the diet are crickets, superworms, waxworms, mealworms, pinky mice, and hissing cockroaches. Prey should be fed a healthy diet for 1 to 2 days before it is fed to your bearded dragon.
- Dust a phosphorus-free calcium supplement over greens daily for juveniles (younger than 2 years of age) and once or twice weekly for adults.
- Provide fresh water daily.

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Environment

- Provide a well-ventilated, screen-topped tank that closes securely. For bearded dragons younger than 1 year of age, provide a 10-gallon tank; for adults, provide a tank that is 48 × 24 × 24 inches (122 × 61 × 61 cm).
 - Maintain a temperature of 75°F to 85°F (23.8°C to 29.4°C) in the coolest area and 90°F to 100°F (32.2°C to 37.7°C) in a basking area, and use infrared lamps and ceramic heat emitters rather than hot rocks to warm the tank.
 - Provide ultraviolet B (UVB) light. Lack of UVB radiation can cause vitamin D deficiency, inhibit calcium absorption, and result in metabolic bone disease of nutritional origin.

Caring for Your New Pet

- UVB bulbs come in two forms: fluorescent or mercury vapor. Replace fluorescent bulbs every 6 to 9 months because even though they continue to produce visible light, they lose UVB output over time. Mercury-vapor UVB bulbs don't lose UVB output over time, so they should be replaced when they stop producing light.
- Place UVB lights within 12 to 18 inches (30.5 to 45.7 cm) of the dragon's basking area. The bulb should not be blocked by glass or plastic, which filters out beneficial rays.
- Provide reptile carpet, newspaper, or paper towels as bedding. Avoid using shavings, sand, corncob, and fiber pellets, which can irritate a bearded dragon's respiratory tract and cause intestinal blockage if eaten.
- Provide branches or rocks for climbing and basking and a hollow log or hide box.
- Provide fresh water daily. Put the old water in a large pan for your pet to soak in.
- Provide separate housing for hatchlings not only because they may nip at each other, but also because some adults may eat the young.

Preventive Care

- A routine physical examination should be performed every 6 to 12 months. Consult a veterinarian with experience in treating bearded dragons if you have any questions or concerns about your pet's health.
- An annual fecal examination should be performed to check for parasites.
- Blood tests should be performed as recommended by your veterinarian.

Common Medical Disorders

- Anorexia
- Egg binding in females
- Intestinal parasites
- Nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism (metabolic bone disease)
- Traumatic wounds
- Skin and jaw infections