

# Bearded Dragon: Husbandry

Bearded dragons belong to the genus *Pogona* and are native to Australia and New Guinea. The species most often found in the pet trade is *Pogona vitticeps*, although some herpiculturists are now breeding *Pogona barbata* in captivity. The bearded dragons (often referred to as 'beardies') that are for sale in the U.S. today have been domestically bred. They generally have a calm temperament and adapt well to handling.

In the wild, bearded dragons live in dry regions, such as deserts and arid woodlands. When not near civilization, they are found on tree trunks, branches and in bushes, and are excellent climbers. When nears cities, they are often found on telephone poles or other man-made wooden vertical structures. In the cooler temperatures of early morning and late afternoon, they often bask in the sun. They are diurnal but may burrow during the day to avoid the excessive heat.

Bearded dragons are omnivores, eating insects, carrion, snails and slugs, as well as fruit, greens and flowers. The diet is thought to change from omnivorous to more herbivorous as the beardie ages. Unfortunately, in captivity bearded dragons often become addicted to a worm and cricket diet, and unless introduced to vegetables and fruits while young, they may not accept these when they get older. This can lead to kidney disease from excessive protein intake and calcium deficiency from the inherent difficulty of supplementing calcium sufficiently to counteract the phosphorous found in the exoskeleton of the insects consumed.

Rarely will a bearded dragon that has been handled and acclimated to captivity threaten to bite. If they do, they will open their mouth in a gaping pose and flare out their beard, which usually has turned black. Minor irritation will sometimes be shown in captivity with a blackening of the beard only.

Young beardies, females soliciting a mate, and submissive males will “wave” as a way of communicating nonaggression. Bearded dragons reach sexual maturity at one to two years of age.

Males can be differentiated from females by the presence of femoral pores. These do not develop to prominence until the beardie matures, so young bearded dragons are difficult to sex.

Females may lay eggs that are fertile, or ovulate without a male present and lay infertile eggs. Newly hatched bearded dragons weigh about 2 grams and are banded in color.

### **Housing**

Although they are not large lizards, beardies do best in larger enclosures. Mature males can usually not be housed together, since they are territorial. Larger beardies may eat small hatchlings, and these should not be housed together. A 20 inch long aquarium is the minimum size for a single adult bearded dragon – larger and taller is better. They prefer to climb to a higher level in the wild – no doubt to be out of the reach of predators. Whatever enclosure is selected, it should be large enough to provide a temperature gradient both horizontally and vertically. To allow for ventilation, it is ideal to have one or two sides of the enclosure made out of screen. Make sure the enclosure’s lid is heavy enough to hold a UV light and a light for basking.

Although sand substrate is commonly used in pet stores and is a natural environment for bearded dragons in the wild, juvenile beardies tend to ingest excessive sand when in a captive enclosure. This leads to sand impaction, and often is fatal. Alternative substrates include gravel and aquarium rock, outdoor carpeting, and newspaper or paper towels.

The enclosure should be checked daily and any stool or urates removed, with the substrate replaced regularly.

Beardies need a selection of areas in which to bask to help them regulate their body temperature. They also need hide boxes, positioned in moderate to cooler temperatures.

### **Temperature**

The temperature gradient during the day should range from 75°F – 87°F with a basking area ranging around 90°-95°F. At night, with the basking light off, temperatures can drop into the 70s.

Thermostats and timers can be useful to decrease the effort needed to provide ideal temperature regulation. Make sure to measure the temperature where the beardedie actually spends time. You may need two to three thermostats to properly regulate the heat gradient.

### **Light**

In addition to temperature regulation, daily exposure to UVB light is essential to calcium absorption. Incandescent lights do not provide the full spectrum required by reptiles. Plant lights and aquarium lights do not provide UVB. In locations where the weather permits, light from outdoor exposure is ideal. Locations under trees often work to provide areas with some shade and some direct sunlight.

Glass aquaria cannot be used for this purpose since the internal temperature will become extremely, and often fatally, high.

If you need to provide supplemental heat at night, a nocturnal reptile bulb is best. White lights will disturb the beardedie's circadian rhythm and may lead to illness.

### **Water**

Water should be provided at all times in a shallow bowl that is not easily tipped or spilled.

### **Feeding**

Baby bearded dragons should be fed food small enough so as not to cause difficulty with digestion and passage. Vegetables should be diced; pelleted food

should be crushed; and if crickets are fed, pinheads should be acquired. For all age bearded dragons, keeping the crickets on a calcium rich substrate for several days prior to feeding, in addition to dusting them with calcium carbonate powder, will help prevent metabolic bone disease.

For adult beardies, protein sources such as crickets, mealworms, king worms and wax worms can be fed. A more balanced calcium phosphorous ratio is provided with the feeding of pinkie mice. Aesthetically, this can be difficult for owners to do, and understandably so. Alternatively, up to 20% of the diet can be either bearded dragon pellets or crushed, low fat dog food; this will help provide the trace elements and more appropriate calcium phosphorous ratio than a diet where the protein source is delivered exclusively by insects with exoskeletons.

The herbivorous portion of the diet should consist of a variety of vegetables and some fruit. Shredded or diced carrots, escarole, parsley, mustard, dandelion and collard greens, green, red and orange peppers, yellow and orange squash, and melon make a good basis for a diet. They do not need to all be fed daily, but can be rotated.

For more information on this subject, speak to the veterinarian who is treating your pet.