



Zoo, Avian, Aquatic and Unusual Pets
Veterinary Consultancy

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Bearded dragon care



This fact sheet will give an overview of general Bearded dragon care. Please use this as a guide to aid you but note that further information on your species should always be carried out. It is imperative that the correct set up/husbandry requirements are met in order for your bearded dragon to thrive.

Bearded dragon facts:

Bearded dragons belong to the lizard family, Agamidae, which contains over 400 species. There are eight species of bearded dragon all originating from Australia. They all differ in size and character:

- *Pogona barbata*.
- *Pogona henrylawsoni*.
- *Pogona microlepidota*.
- *Pogona minor minor*.
- *Pogona minor minima*.
- *Pogona minor mitchelli*.
- *Pogona nullarbor*.
- *Pogona vitticeps*

The three commonly seen in the pet trade today are *P. barbata*, *P. henrylawsoni* and *P. Vitticeps*. Of these various colours or morphs exist. In general, bearded dragons grow in length to 18-22 inches and weigh between 250g-550g. Their lifespan can range from 7-15 years. The oldest bearded dragon on record lived until they were 18 years old! Bearded dragons are very affectionately referred to as 'beardies'.

Housing:

*Please also see our additional bearded dragon set up guide for extra information.

Bearded dragons should be housed in a horizontal vivarium, with as large as possible floor area for them to explore. The minimum sized enclosure for an adult beardie measuring a total length of 40cm would be 120cm wide, x 60cm deep x 60cm high (FBH, 2022).



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Vivarium's can be made from a few different materials including wood, glass or plastic. Glass vivarium's are generally not ideal for terrestrial reptiles such as the bearded dragon that requires a lot of floor space. They are also top opening which can sometimes make it difficult to reach your bearded dragon and clean the enclosure. Wood vivarium's wick up too much moisture which can cause health issues for bearded dragons. Due to these drawbacks we tend to recommend a plastic style vivarium with a glass opening on the front. These style enclosures offer more privacy for your bearded dragon but importantly are easy to clean. The enclosure should have a screen, mesh-style top to allow for ventilation but prevent escape. Place your enclosure away from direct sunlight ie. the window and away from radiators to avoid overheating.

On the bottom of the enclosure there are various substrates that can be used. For a healthy bearded dragon a reptile safe sand, such as children's play sand can be mixed with top soil that contains no added fertilisers. This sand-soil mixture allows your bearded dragon to carry out normal digging behaviours. Bearded dragons can also have slate or 'reptile carpet' on the floor of the enclosure. This makes for easy cleaning but they must be provided with a tray or box filled with soil-sand mix to allow for natural digging behaviours. This should be placed in the cooler end of their enclosure.

Do not use loose substrate which contains large pieces, such as wood chip as these are often mistakenly eaten, causing impactions which require surgery to be removed.

Within the enclosure stones, branches, logs and hides should be used to provide enrichment for your bearded dragon. These should occasionally be moved around or changed to mentally stimulate your bearded dragon.

Spot clean your bearded dragon enclosure every day with a full clean out once a week.

- FBH (Federation of British Herpetologists), 2022. *Code of practice for recommended minimum enclosure sizes for reptiles*. (Online) Available at: <https://www.thefbh.org/news>

Free-range:

We do not recommend keeping bearded dragons free range in the house or in one dedicated room. They can lose heat quickly and require access to ultraviolet light to carry out normal metabolic processes (see below). They are also at risk of injury from other pets, becoming trapped under furniture or electrocuted. It is also unhygienic to do this as reptiles shed salmonella in their faeces. However, regular stress-free handling for short periods of time outside their enclosure, a few times a day is recommended for bonding and checking for signs of illness.



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Heating:

Beardies are ectothermic meaning they require an external heat source to warm their bodies up to carry out normal metabolic processes. A basking heat lamp, usually a ceramic bulb should be placed at one end of the enclosure. A second heat lamp may then need to be placed in the middle of the enclosure to provide the correct temperature gradient. This can depend on your enclosure size and the strength of the basking lamp bulb. (Please see our additional information sheet on bearded dragon set up). Temperatures should be regularly checked to see if the extra heat lamp is required. In some cases, a heat mat placed underneath the outside of the enclosure can be used. This is useful to stop temperatures dropping too low at night-time. It should cover at least one third of the bottom of the enclosure and can be controlled by a thermostat.

With the correct set up a temperature gradient is then created. The warmest part of the enclosure is at the top and the cooler end at the bottom of the enclosure. Probe thermometers should be placed at the top, middle and bottom to ensure temperatures are correct. Alternatively, a thermometer gun can be used, and temperatures checked daily.

The heat lamp should be attached to a thermostat which can maintain the required temperature and attached to a timer which will allow the heat lamp to be on for 12 hours of the day.

Night-time temperatures should not drop below 20 degrees.

Avoid placing rocks or wooden bridges close to the heat lamps as beardies can climb onto these, become too close to the heat and burn themselves.

Enclosure temperatures:

Bearded dragon:

- Under basking lamp: 38-40°C
- Ambient (middle): 30-33°C
- Cool end: 22-25°C
- At night: No lower than 20°C

UV Lighting:

Beardies are highly dependent on ultraviolet (UV) light for their health. It is a common mistake of inexperienced reptile keepers to forget this, which is extremely detrimental to



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their health. The most important ultraviolet light required is UVB. UVB allows bearded dragons to utilize the calcium in their body, regardless of the amount they might digest.

UVB strength is measured as a percentage. When buying a UVB light you will see this percentage on the side of the packaging. The strength required for bearded dragons ranges from 8-12%. There is a range as this can depend on the height of your enclosure and how close your bearded dragon will be to the light. The further away the higher the percentage you may require. Please check the distance of your light to the top of your bearded dragon and follow the guidelines on the ultraviolet light to choose the best percentage light for your bearded dragon.

Please have a look at the following website for further information:

<http://www.uvguide.co.uk/whatreptilesneed.htm>

We recommend using a strip UVB light across the top of your enclosure as this allows the whole of enclosure to be exposed to the light. Combined heat and UVB lights are available however once your bearded dragon has heated itself up adequately, they will walk away from the light meaning they are not exposed to the UVB light, which is far from ideal.

Overtime UVB in the light degenerates, meaning although they are still producing light it is not the required UVB spectrum that your bearded dragon needs. This means the light needs to be changed every 10-12 months depending on the product you buy. The guidelines should be on the box as to when to change your light. Alternatively, you can check your lights UV output using a UV gun.

The UV light should be attached to a timer which allows the light to be on for 12 hours of the day.

Always use a reflector with your UV light to ensure all the UV rays are going down onto your bearded dragon.

Humidity:

We need to provide the correct humidity to keep our bearded dragons suitably hydrated. Bearded dragons being desert dwelling species do not require high humidity and are usually content with a range between 30-40%. A hygrometer is used to measure the humidity. A water bowl should be placed in their enclosure and changed daily to allow them the option to drink instead of taking water from their food.

We also recommend bathing a healthy adult bearded dragon once to twice a week. To do this use a small tray, fill it with warm water about 2cm in depth for an adult bearded dragon. Watch them



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carefully and do not allow them to fully submerge their heads in the water. Allow them to bath for 10-15 minutes or until the water feels cool.

Cage enrichment:

As previously mentioned, various sized branches or logs and stones should be placed within the enclosure for your beardie to climb upon and hide behind.

Branches can be artificial or real, however do not use any branches that produce sap as this could cause damage to your beardie. All branches and stones should be thoroughly cleaned before being placed into the environment. This can be done by soaking them in a product called F10 which is available to buy on the internet.

Commercially available hides can be placed throughout the enclosure or alternatively plant pots or logs can be used to allow your beardie a safe place to rest.

Companions:

Generally, bearded dragons are solitary and can be very territorial, only sharing their space if mating. Living with another adult bearded dragon over a prolonged period can be very stressful for them. They often fight, biting off each other's toes or tails and even kill smaller bearded dragons. If you own more than one, it is advised to house them separately. This is also ideal if any health issues were to occur and helps prevent the spread of any infections.

Diet:

Bearded dragons are omnivores, eating live invertebrates and leafy vegetables.

An adult's diet should consist of primarily leafy greens such as collard greens, dandelions, and clover. They can also have the occasional bell pepper, butternut squash and parsley. These should be dusted with a calcium (Cali-dust) and vitamin D3 powder (Nutrobal) before feeding. Alongside this, adults should be offered live insect food.

The following insects are suitable to feed:

House crickets, black crickets, grasshoppers, Dubia roaches and locusts. Mealworms and waxworms can be given as occasional treats. They are extremely fatty and a regular diet of them can lead to obesity and a condition known as fatty liver.

All live food should be gut loaded. Gut loading is where the insect is fed high calcium supplements before being fed to your bearded dragon. Insects can also be dusted with a calcium (Cali-dust) and vitamin D3 powder (Nutrobal) immediately before being fed.



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If the insect is not eaten within 30 minutes they should be removed from the enclosure. As they may bite/attack your beardie which can cause small wounds and abscesses to occur.

Please also see our additional bearded dragon diet sheet

Medical conditions we most commonly see:

Many cases are connected to poor husbandry. Try to meet all their husbandry needs to avoid a vet visit. Conditions we may see are:

- Endoparasites (worms) This is why we ask you to bring a faeces sample in when coming to your appointment. This is something we can easily rule out at the clinic if we have a fresh sample to check.
- Nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism (metabolic bone disease)
- Stomatitis, periodontal disease
- Dysecdysis (Problems shedding)
- Obesity leading to other conditions



Insurance

Unfortunately, we can never predict what may happen to our bearded dragons, so we highly recommend getting pet insurance. A monthly fee can give you peace of mind knowing your pet is covered for the best treatment should anything happen. There are many insurance companies available, so we advise contacting each of them to find a policy that is right for you. We advise a policy that will cover your bearded dragon for its whole lifetime, for chronic illnesses and for the maximum amount that is available. If this is not possible then covering your bearded dragon for as much as you can afford will give you peace of mind should an accident or emergency occur.