

# Care Cards

## Bearded Dragons



Bearded dragon is a common name for specific members of the genus *Pogona*. These reptiles display a prominent “beard” which is composed of large, modified scales covering the throat. When threatened, the beard will become distended to give the illusion of a larger animal. Other social interactions displayed by bearded dragons include head bobbing, arm waving, and color phases. Bearded dragons are easy to maintain; requiring smaller overall cage size when compared to other reptiles.

Young bearded dragons can be housed in a 10-20 gallon aquarium; however, I strongly suggest you start with a larger, more permanent enclosure. This will allow for rapid growth and a more acceptable living condition for your pet. Juveniles should be housed singly, when kept in groups, ample food should be provided and smaller individuals should be separated if they are not thriving. Adult bearded dragons can be housed singly or in small groups with two or more females per male. The enclosure should provide three to four square feet per individual.

The preferred substrate for juvenile bearded dragons is either newspaper or butcher’s paper. The preferred substrate for adult bearded dragons should be either children’s play sand or aquarium sand. Other less common substrate items include dirt, potting soil, and crushed walnut. Bearded dragons are desert animals and their cage should be setup as close to natural as possible. Bearded dragons have a tendency to eat anything in their environment; this should also serve as a warning when using artificial plants. Rocks

and whole or broken clay pots will provide basking and hiding areas. Woods and bark such as grape vine wood, fig wood, cholla skeletons, cork bark, and other dry desert woods can also be stacked or piled to create additional basking and hiding spots.

The cage will need a light source, preferably a full-spectrum lamp, which emits both ultraviolet A and ultraviolet B wavelength. Remember bearded dragons are susceptible to metabolic bone disease from improper calcium absorption and storage. Additional spotlights should be positioned over basking sites to assist the reptile in reaching its optimum basking temperature of 98 to 100 degrees Fahrenheit. This temperature will enable the bearded dragon optimum intestinal microbial activity for digestion. Lights and basking sites should be positioned to allow the reptile to bask 8 to 12 inches from the light source. When housed in groups, multiple basking sites will need to be provided. I strongly recommend the use of automatic timers for all light sources. This will provide the reptile with a consistent light and dark cycle. Additionally, I strongly advise one or two hours of direct, **unfiltered** (not through glass or plastic) sunlight daily. Natural exposure to unfiltered sunlight is the best husbandry practice owners can provide for their reptiles. With artificial lighting the ultraviolet radiation will eventually degrade to the point of being ineffective long before the fluorescent tube burns out. It is essential that these bulbs be changed whenever black bands appear around the ends of the tubes, or about every six to twelve months.

The daytime temperature should be between 82-94 degrees Fahrenheit. The nighttime temperature should be between 68-74 degrees Fahrenheit. If necessary, additional heat sources such as heat tape and under tank heating pads should be positioned on the warmer side of the enclosure to ensure a temperature gradient for proper thermoregulation. You should observe the pets moving from one side to the other throughout the day.

Young hatchlings should be fed small insects like crickets and wax worms daily. The insects should be 1/3 to 1/2 the size of the lizards head to allow for optimum ingestion. Frequent feedings is essential for

hatchlings. Fresh vegetarian such as mustard or turnip greens, parsley, dandelion, and hibiscus should also be offered daily. These should be cut into small thin strips to encourage ingestion. As the hatchlings grow, they need to be separated by size and moved into larger containers. This will help prevent the larger hatchlings from dominating, stressing, or even eating the smaller hatchlings. As the juveniles grow, you will need to increase the size of the insects being offered. Additional insects such as mealworms and superworms can be added to the diet. Eventually pinkie mice can also be offered once or twice a week. Additional vegetables like collard greens, watercress, parsnips, green beans, snow peas, broccoli, sprouts and squash can also be added to the diet. A varied diet will help prevent boredom and possible decreased feeding by the reptile.

Adult bearded dragons should be fed a diet consisting of 90% vegetable matter. Dark green, leafy vegetables and an orange-fleshed squash should be offered daily. Animal food items should only be offered once or twice a week, except during the breeding cycle, because of additional demand on the female's body during gestation. The food should be sprinkled with a calcium, without phosphorous, supplement every other day. Improper calcium levels can result in metabolic bone disease. Multivitamins may be lightly sprinkled on the food no more frequently than once every 10 to 14 days.

#### **Dr. Bruce's Herbivore Diet (Iguanas, Bearded Dragons, Skinks, Chuckwallas)**

- 60% Dark Green Leafy Vegetables (Various Greens, Endive, Escarole, Watercress)
- 15% Orange-fleshed Squash (Acorn, Butternut, Kaboucha, Pumpkin, Spaghetti)
- 15% Other Vegetables (Parsnips, Snow Peas, Snap Peas, Green Beans, Carrot Tops)
- 10% Flowers and Fruits (Hibiscus, Rose, Dandelion, Fig, Papaya, Mango, Citrus Fruits)

Bearded dragons should be sprayed with water daily. The cage sides and any plants should also be sprayed. Bearded dragons will often lap water as their heads are being sprayed. The spraying should be continued as long as they are drinking. Bearded dragons will rarely drink from a water dish; however, they will readily soak in the water container.

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when using artificial plants. A variety of live plants can be used to landscape the environment. Ponytail palm, most species of the Sansevieria family, and other high temperature, desert type plants will add a more naturalistic appearance to the reptiles environment. Rocks and whole or broken clay pots will provide basking and hiding areas. Woods and bark such as grape vine wood, fig wood, cholla skeletons, cork bark, and other dry desert woods can also be stacked or piled to create additional basking and hiding spots. However you decide to landscape your bearded dragons enclosure, remember, the more natural and varied the environment, the happier and more relaxed they will be. A common mistake when preparing the cage environment is to design a flat, boring landscape. Because the preferred substrate is sand, you can make a more three dimensional environment.

Sexual dimorphism is difficult to distinguish in juvenile bearded dragons. At six months of age, a healthy bearded dragon can be sexed by lifting its tail dorsally over its back. Male dragons will be identified by the two hemipene bulges caudal to the vent at the base of the tail. Once fully mature, several secondary sexual characteristics may be noted. Male dragons have a larger and wider head than females. Male beards are darker and wider than females. Males will have larger femoral pores than females. Mature, female bearded dragons will wave one of their front legs in a slow arc towards a male during the breeding season.

Bearded dragons have many other characteristics that make them enjoyable reptile pets. They have a dinosaur-like appearance, are easy to handle and are relatively tame. Bearded dragons are omnivorous, and will feed on a variety of insects, small animals, flowers, vegetables, and fruit. In addition they can store nutrients utilizing their abdominal fat pads. They are one of the easiest reptiles to breed. This is important because bearded dragons are no longer legal to export from their native country, Australia. Females will often have multiple clutches, which will give beginning breeders additional chances for success.

