

at the heart of critical care

ANIMAL EMERGENCY CENTER

2100 W. Silver Spring Drive
Glendale, WI 53209
414-540-6710
www.animalemergencycenter.com

Bearded Dragon Care

Paul Gibbons, DVM, MS, DABVP

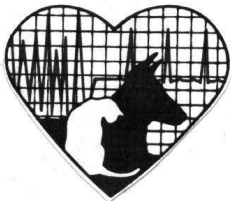
Natural History The two most common pet bearded dragons are *Pogona vitticeps* and *P. barbata*. They are found in the rocky, semi-desert areas of Australia and Tasmania. Bearded dragons are ground dwellers, but will climb rocks and low branches. They are active during daylight hours.

Special Characteristics

- Longevity:** In captivity, bearded dragons can live 7 to 10 years with proper care. They become sexually mature between 10 and 18 months.
- Size:** Adults will reach a total length of 15-20 inches.
- Temperament:** Bearded dragons make wonderful pets. They are generally very docile, and usually take well to handling. They are curious and attentive to their surroundings. Interesting behaviors include arm waving, head bobbing, and digging.

Captive Care Requirements

- Lighting:** Ultraviolet B (UVB) is required to maintain bearded dragons. The best source of UVB is the sun, but a special **fluorescent** tube or mercury vapor bulb purchased from a reptile specialty store. Fluorescent tubes must be placed no more than 12 inches from the basking site and must be replaced every 12 months, because even though visible light is emitted, the UVB fades. Lighting should be on a timer to provide about 14 hours of daylight and 10 hours of darkness. Light bulbs with a tungsten filament, even those with Neodymium and sold as "full spectrum" bulbs, provide heat but not UVB.
- Temperature:** The daytime temperature of the enclosure should be 80-85°F with a basking spot of 88-95°F. A lamp that emits heat should be placed above one end of the tank, providing a temperature gradient with one side of the tank warmer than the other. Select the wattage of the bulb to provide the proper temperature within the tank. Under tank heaters are useful to gently raise the overall temperature of the tank, but should be used with a thermostat or rheostat to accommodate changing room temperatures. At night the temperature should drop to 70-75°F. When room temperatures are below 70°F at night, use an under tank heater, ceramic heat emitter, or heat the entire room to 70°F. Obviously, at least two thermometers must be in use to monitor these temperatures, and care must be taken to prevent burns to the lizard. Heating elements can be dangerous if not used properly, and a smoke alarm might prevent a house fire.
- Humidity:** Good ventilation is essential and the humidity should be moderate (40-60% RH).
- Water:** Provide a water pan that is large enough for the whole dragon to soak its body. Lizards often defecate in their water, so it must be replaced daily and the pan cleaned with soapy water and disinfected with dilute bleach at least once a week.
- Enclosure:** Bearded dragons grow quickly, so it is best to start with a large enclosure. A single adult bearded dragon will do well in a 75 or 120-gallon aquarium with a screen top. When building an enclosure, it should be at least 48" long, 24" wide, and 18" high. It must be well ventilated and easy to disinfect.
- Substrate:** The bottom of the enclosure should be covered with something safe and easy to clean. Since bearded dragons will eat bedding made of small particles, do not use them. Never use sand, wood chips, calcium sand, or gravel. Good choices include newspaper, indoor/outdoor carpet, or, if routine disposal is possible, potting soil.



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Cage furniture: Provide branches to climb, rocks to bask upon, and shelter to hide in. Ideally a rock will be placed under the heat lamp that is above the under-tank heater. Hardy plants like sansevieria, aloe, palms, and cycads may be used.

Feeding: Bearded dragons require a varied diet. They are omnivorous, and will eat a variety of items. A salad of calcium rich leafy greens and other vegetables should be offered every other day. The best greens include kale, collard greens, mustard greens, and dandelion greens. Insects can make up a substantial portion of the diet as well. Crickets, mealworms, and Zoophobas (king mealworms) are widely available and can be "gutloaded" with T-Rex Calcium-Plus cricket diet and calcium rich leafy green vegetables. Do not use gelatin-based calcium/water cricket supplements; give crickets a clean source of water that is shallow enough they will not drown or use a sponge. Depending upon the size of the dragon, insects should be chosen by size. Hatchling dragons eat two to three week old crickets, and adults will take six-week old (full-grown) crickets. Infant mice (pinkies) should be offered once a week to dragons over four months of age. Choose the age and size of mice according to the size of the lizard. Always feed bearded dragons in a dish to prevent ingestion of substrate.

Supplements: Juvenile bearded dragons require calcium (without phosphorus) supplementation three times each week, and a high quality reptile multivitamin every other week. These should be dusted on insects and sprinkled over salads. Adult dragons on a good diet (leafy greens, "gut-loaded" insects, and pinkies) will do well with weekly calcium and monthly multivitamin supplementation.

Grooming and Handling

Bearded dragons will learn to tolerate routine handling. When handled on a daily basis, they seem to become more relaxed as time goes on, and cleaning the enclosure is simplified when the animal is docile. Bearded dragon skin is very rough, so light gloves and long sleeves will protect from mild scratches. The toenails become needle-sharp, and should be trimmed every few weeks. Finally, because all reptiles are potentially infected with *Salmonella* bacteria, which can be transmitted from reptiles to humans, cleanliness and hygiene are essential.

