



Bearded Dragon Care (Inland/Central)

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General Information

Native Habitat: Central and Southern Australia

Scientific Name: *Pogona vitticeps*

Lifespan: 6-12 years or more

Adult Length: 18-24"

Housing

Juvenile bearded dragons should be started in a 10-20 gallon tank. Adults should be kept in a minimum of a 40 gallon breeder tank, with bigger tanks preferred. They are ground dwelling lizards so floor space is preferred over height. Bearded dragons are best kept solitary to prevent injuries and breeding.

Particulate substrate such as orchid bark, sand and compressed fiber is not recommended as it can lead to gastrointestinal impaction if your bearded dragon eats it. I recommend repti-carpet, paper towel, butcher paper, tile, linoleum or newspaper.

A hide should be provided that is large enough for your bearded dragon to easily get into and out of. One can be placed on both the warm and cool side of the tank. Be sure all decorations are secure so that nothing will fall over as your bearded dragon moves through the tank. Any climbing surfaces should be low to the ground in the event your bearded dragon decides to jump off of them. The basking site should have a hide or climbing surface that is on an incline so that your bearded dragon can have a gradient of both heat and UVB exposure.

Lighting

Bearded dragons require a high output of UVB light, as well as a basking area that reaches 95-100 degrees Fahrenheit. For this reason they do well with mercury vapor bulbs. These bulbs need to be changed yearly as the UVB levels degrade even if the bulb is still bright. Be sure to closely check the temperatures before putting your bearded dragon in the enclosure with an infrared temperature gun or a temperature gauge with a probe that can be placed directly on

the basking site.

Their temperature gradient should be between 75-85 degrees Fahrenheit in their enclosure during the day, and can drop to 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit at night. A night bulb may be required if the temperature drops below this.

If a non-mercury vapor bulb is used, you will need to provide both a source of heat as well as a source of UVB. Heating should always be provided as a lamp/dome fixture. UVB options include compact coiled bulbs and linear fluorescent bulbs. Most UVB sources need to be changed every 6 months, even if the light is still working. The UVB bulb should be placed closest to where the bearded dragon spends most of its time, and should not be put behind glass or plastic. The bearded dragon should be able to sit within 6-12" of the UVB source and should have an inclined surface to provide a gradient of exposure.

Water

Fresh water should be provided at all times for your bearded dragon. Even if they are not seen drinking, it should always be offered. You can give them a dish large enough for them to soak as well as long as it is changed regularly. They will often use their water dish as a bathroom. To entice drinking and assist with shedding, your bearded dragon can be soaked in shallow tepid water for 15-20 minutes daily.

Diet

A varied diet should be provided for your bearded dragon. Young beardies can be fed daily while adults can be offered live insects 3-4 times a week. Options for staple feeders include dubia roaches and crickets. Occasionally they can be provided with waxworms, hornworms, red wigglers, mealworms and super worms. The length of the prey offered should be no bigger than the distance between your bearded dragon's eyes.

Calcium powder that contains no phosphorous should be used to dust the bugs 3-4 times weekly. A multivitamin containing Vitamin A such as Nekton-Rep should be used to dust the bugs once weekly.

Young bearded dragons will typically only eat live prey while adults will often eat vegetation as well. Dark leafy greens such as kale, collard greens, turnip greens, dandelion greens, endive, mustard greens can be offered daily. Avoid spinach as it binds to calcium and renders it unusable for your bearded dragon. You may also offer a small amount of vegetables such as acorn squash, cucumber, bell pepper and butternut squash. Fruit can be offered rarely but should typically be avoided due to high levels of sugar and poor nutrient content.

Handling

Bearded dragons are generally docile and easy to train to handling. Start handling your bearded dragon a week or two after acquiring it so that it has a chance to get used to its new home. Always handle your bearded dragon close to the ground in the event they decide to run out of your hands. They feel most comfortable when all four limbs have a surface to grasp onto. You may bring your bearded dragon outside for some time in the sun but only with direct supervision. Do not allow them to eat any bugs outside, especially fireflies, as these are very toxic to your pet.

Common Health Issues

- Dysecdysis (Abnormal/incomplete shedding): This occurs in bearded dragons due to improper husbandry. Often retained shed will be located around the feet and toes, which can cause constriction at those areas and lead to necrosis. To prevent this from happening it is important to be sure there is appropriate humidity and temperature in the bearded dragon's environment. You may soak your bearded dragon once daily in shallow, tepid water for 15-20 minutes during shedding.
- Gastrointestinal Impaction: Impaction is the clogging of the GI tract with material so that it cannot progress normally through the GI tract. This can cause necrosis of the intestinal walls if not surgically addressed in a timely fashion. Reptiles can be prone to impaction if they are kept on a particulate substrate such as sand, gravel or fiber. Impaction can also happen with inappropriately large food items or feeding highly chitinous insects in large numbers. This will cause your pet to become lethargic, inappetent, and they will not be defecating. Radiographs are often used to check for impacted material. Sometimes barium is needed to evaluate exactly where the blockage is occurring. If you suspect your animal may be impacted, they should be evaluated by a veterinarian immediately.
- Intestinal parasites: Many of the feeder insects that reptiles carry can harbor intestinal parasites that may be transmitted to your reptile. They can also obtain gastrointestinal parasites by contacting other reptiles. A small number of these parasites may normally inhabit your reptile's gastrointestinal tract without any problems. However with overgrowth of these parasites they can cause a problem. They can cause malabsorption of nutrients, inappetence, lethargy and abnormal stool production. A few of the common parasites encountered include pinworms, coccidia, and flagellated protozoa. A fecal exam is recommended yearly for your reptile to screen for any abnormal amounts of GI parasites.
- Secondary Nutritional Hyperparathyroidism: This disease process is caused by improper husbandry with some possibilities including lack of calcium or vitamin D3 in the diet, excess phosphorous in the diet and absence of a UVB light source. A majority of reptiles need calcium added to their diet in the form of a Calcium powder (no phosphorous) used to dust the insects a few times weekly. In order to process this calcium, a UVB light

source is required. When there is an imbalance in the calcium and phosphorous, the body increases the breakdown of calcium stores from the animal's bones in order to maintain appropriate calcium levels. In an animal this can cause significant deformation of the skeleton including bowing of the legs, shortening of the snout, and stunting of growth. The bones become fragile and are prone to fractures. As calcium is needed for many bodily functions, such as muscle contraction, the animal may become weak, lethargic, and anorexic when the body can no longer maintain its calcium levels. This is a process that can typically be remedied with improvement in husbandry and long term calcium supplementation under veterinary supervision. In severe cases, hospitalization may be required to give the animal the best chance at recovery.

- Yellow Fungal Disease (CANV): This fungal disease often shows up as a discoloration on an area of scales which spreads over time. The scales can be crusted with yellow or brown material, and can be misshapen and dull after shedding. Species that are most commonly affected include bearded dragons, green iguanas, veiled chameleons, uromastyx and water dragons. Yellow fungal disease is associated with dirty, crowded conditions and is transmissible between reptiles as well as from the environment. The prognosis is poor with this disease as it can spread quickly and lead to systemic infection which results in anorexia, weight loss and ultimately death. Intensive treatment and overview by a veterinarian is required to give these animals a chance at survival. Skin sampling for fungal DNA testing can be completed to see if this fungus is affecting your bearded dragon.
- Atadenovirus: This viral disease is contagious between bearded dragons and can cause serious illness and death. Often times this virus will spread amongst a group of juveniles that are housed together, causing them to not grow as well, lose weight, act lethargic and die without any other signs. It can be spread from bearded dragon to bearded dragon directly, through feces as well as from indirect contact through tools or people. There can be bearded dragons that appear healthy, but who carry this virus and spread it to others. Bearded dragons with this virus will often be prone to secondary infection, especially overgrowth of intestinal parasites and dysbiosis. Often times these bearded dragons will die within a few months of life. If they do survive, they are often immunocompromised through their adult life and can eventually have spread of the virus to other organs that can lead to their demise. Bearded dragons should always be housed separately and a new addition should be quarantined for at least 30 days. It is recommended to have Atadenovirus testing done at your veterinarian before intermixing tools and supplies between your bearded dragons due to the fact that there are carriers who could infect your susceptible pets. Unfortunately there is no current effective treatment for this virus.