



Bearded Dragon

The bearded dragon is generally considered one of the all-time best lizard pets. It is known for being alert, hardy and tame, and bearded dragon owners love watching their lizards, whether during a feeding frenzy while chasing crickets or simply interacting with each other. Bearded dragons exhibit interesting behaviors, too, such as “arm waving,” in which a female (and occasionally males) may lift a front leg in the air and “wave” it as a submissive gesture. The spiny “beard” from which the lizard gets its common name may also be extended, though it’s uncommon for tame captives to do so; dragons typically do this when alarmed.

Hatchlings measure about 4 inches; large adults can be nearly 2 feet in length.

Average captive lifespan is between six and 10 years, though there are reports of specimens living twice that long.

Caging

While a hatchling dragon could live in a 20-gallon aquarium for a short time, it will quickly need a larger enclosure. A 55-gallon aquarium or equal-sized enclosure is OK for one or two adult dragons. Screening should be used for proper ventilation, whether as a top on an aquarium enclosure or in the construction of a custom enclosure.

During warm weather bearded dragons can be kept in outdoor cages. Be sure the outdoor enclosure provides both sunny basking areas and shady retreats, as well as shelter from rain. Having access to the sun outdoors provides healthy UV.

Bearded dragons like to climb, so some sturdy branches are welcome in their enclosures.

Lighting

Bearded dragons like it hot. A basking site of about 100 degrees Fahrenheit works well for them. The basking site can be provided by a spotlight (such as a mercury vapor bulb) positioned over a rock, branch, etc. at one end of the enclosure. Keeping the spotlight at one end of the cage will allow your dragon to thermoregulate (move between a cooler end of the enclosure and the hotter end with the basking area). The cooler end of the enclosure can be kept at about 80 degrees.

Temperature

In addition to the basking spotlight, provide full-spectrum UVB (ultraviolet) lighting over the rest of the enclosure. This lighting is critically important for dragons that are kept indoors, as it assists them in synthesizing vitamin D3, which aids in calcium absorption. There are many types of lights available; consult with store employees and read the packaging to determine the best for your setup.

Heat can also be provided using heat tape, heat emitters and other devices available in pet stores. Keep a thermometer in the enclosure to track the cage temperature. At night, it can go down to about 65 degrees.

Substrate

Sand is commonly used with bearded dragons, though there is concern, especially when keeping young lizards, that intestinal impaction could result if they accidentally eat some. It is not recommended that you keep young bearded dragons on sand, or any kind of loose substrate. Newspaper, paper toweling or reptile carpet (though watch for loose threads or areas that can snag dragon toenails) would be better choices.

Adult bearded dragons can be kept on these same substrates. If you must use sand, playground sand (available at hardware and do-it-yourself stores) is a decent choice due to the fact that it's not as dusty as other types of sand. You can also purchase digestible "reptile sand" at reptile and pet stores, though opinions on the safety of these are varied. If you try some, be sure to follow manufacturer directions. Sand mixed with clean soil that has not been treated with any fertilizers, pesticides, etc., can also be used with adult bearded dragons.

If you keep your bearded dragons on sand, reduce the risk of impaction by offering food on a shallow dish rather than placing it directly on the substrate.

Food

Bearded dragons are omnivorous, meaning they eat both animal and plant matter. They are not usually picky and eat with gusto.

Insects, such as crickets and mealworms, should be dusted with a vitamin/mineral supplement and calcium. Dusting can be achieved by placing the insects in a plastic bag with some of the powder, and shaking the bag to lightly coat the insects prior to offering them to your lizards.

Also offer bearded dragons finely chopped veggies (such as romaine lettuce, zucchini, carrots, etc.), greens (collard, mustard, dandelion, etc.) and fruit (kiwi, banana, mango, etc.). Use healthy, vitamin-rich items; sprinkle the appropriate amount of powdered supplements on these foods, too. Avoid iceberg lettuce because it is not nutritious.

Bearded dragons will also eat pinky mice, and a wide variety of nutritionally balanced manufactured diets are available at pet stores, too.

Again, if you keep your dragons on sand, offer food on a shallow dish rather than placing it directly on the substrate.

Water

Most bearded dragons use a water spray bottle; they'll lick water droplets off cage walls, rocks, etc., as well as themselves. Don't overdo it; you don't want their enclosure to get too wet and become humid. You can also offer water in a shallow dish (such as a jar lid); be sure to keep this dish and the water in it clean.

Handling

Bearded dragons are generally quite docile and will tolerate handling better than other lizard species. This is especially true of adults that have spent their entire lives in captivity (of course, there may be exceptions). It's not unusual to visit a reptile expo and see fat and happy bearded dragons lounging amid merchandise at vendor tables, or perched on their owners' shoulders.