

Basic Care Of Bearded Dragons

Prepared by Dr. Don Factor,

Owner of : West End Veterinary Office - 41 Fullerton Ave. Newburgh, NY 12550

845-565-004

Bearded dragons are suitable pets for children because these lizards rarely bite, scratch or whip with their tails. They genuinely respond to gentle handling, will look you in the eye, eat from your hand and rest in your lap. A dragon should not be caught or lifted by its tail; its body should be fully supported when it is being held or carried.

Visiting your veterinarian specializing in reptile care as soon as you get your new pet is the first step in helping to a long and healthy life for your new pet.

Is Your Bearded Dragon a Male or a Female?

It is important to know the gender of your pet in order to watch for and prevent potential problems with egg-laying in the female. A mature female bearded dragon should be examined by an exotic animal veterinarian at least yearly.

In the juvenile stage, there is little difference between male and female bearded dragons. As they approach adult size, the male begins to develop a broader head, and his large black "beard" becomes apparent in breeding season. Males also have a thicker tail, enlarged femoral pores along their inner thighs, and a wider cloacal opening. Behavioral differences may be observed, but these are not always conclusive for sexing bearded dragons.

Diet

In captivity, both live prey and salads should be offered to provide a balanced diet for your dragon. Because dragons are active during the day, they should be fed in the morning.

- The dragon's live prey may consist of appropriately sized crickets, cockroaches, various misc. insects (i.e.- field sweepings from pesticide free fields), superworms, mealworms, wax worms and locusts. The worm species tend to be higher in fat and lower in other nutrients, and should be fed sparingly. The prey should be fed balanced diets (commercially available cricket food, etc) including fresh greens for several days before feeding out. Prey are dusted (with ground Turns or other calcium powder) daily for baby bearded dragons. The frequency of dusting diminishes until adulthood, when prey are only supplemented about once every 7-10 days.
- Salads should consist of chopped mixes of a variety of greens, such as carrot tops, dandelion, turnip greens, mustard greens, and beet greens, kale, collards, bok choy, swiss chard, escarole, spinach, and cilantro.
- Vegetables can comprise up to 20% of the diet and can include squash, zucchini, sweet potato, broccoli, peas, beans and okra. Fruits can make up about 2-5% of the diet and may include papaya, melon, and banana.
- Treats can consist of edible flower blossoms. Commercial pellets are marketed for bearded dragons, but they haven't been tested long-term, and may not have enough moisture content.

Feeding Schedule and Content

Baby-bearded dragons are fed twice daily and eat mostly small moving prey, such as pinhead crickets. As a general rule, dragons are fed crickets with a body length no greater than the width of the dragon's head. However, salads should be introduced at this early age so they are accustomed to eating greens and vegetables as they mature. As the dragon grows, the insect prey size increases. However, the percentage of insects vs. vegetable matter consumed begin to decrease (see below percentage prey vs. vegetables)

- Juvenile bearded dragons are growing rapidly and need plenty of food offered daily. Hungry juveniles housed together will nip the toes and tail-tips of their cage mates.
- Adult bearded dragons can be fed daily or every second day and prefer a diet of about 55% salad, 20% vegetables and 25% prey.
- Bearded dragons thrive in low humidity. Drinking water should be provided in a shallow bowl or saucer. Dragons will often soak in their water bowl and may defecate in it. Drinking and soaking bowls should be cleaned at least daily. I prefer to soak the dragon for 15 minutes once to twice a day outside of the normal habitat in a shallow warm water filled cat litter pan (which is used only for this purpose).

How to Keep Your Bearded Dragon Healthy, Happy and Safe

- Quarantine new dragons in a separate area of the house for 3-6 months.
- Dragons housed together should be of similar size, with plenty of space available.
- Monitor body conditions of multiple dragons housed together for signs of stress in subordinate ones.
- Ensure a gradient of temperatures in their enclosure, from 70 F to a hot basking spot of around 95F.
- Ensure proper UVB/UVA lighting. Change every 3 months and use a meter to test strength.
- Expose to unfiltered sunlight or full spectrum day bulbs.
- Allow time outdoors when the temperature is above 70°F (only in screen enclosure with access to shade and water)
- Consult with your exotic animal veterinarian about supplementation of calcium and vitamin D3.

Housing for your bearded dragon should:

- be spacious and easy to clean, with smooth *sides* to prevent rostral (nose) abrasions.
- be the size of a 10-gallon tank for a baby dragon; adults-need large enclosures of 4 x 2 ft
- be large enough for climbing, exploration, basking.
- contain thick climbing branches or rocks to support heavy-bodied dragons.
- include a large, shallow water tray for soaking.
- have easy access of food and water containers for frequent cleaning.
- include acceptable substrates: my preference is newspaper, paper towels or butcher paper, as it is easy to clean, less likely to be eaten, and more hygienic.
- provide a hiding area, such as a cardboard box or plant pot

It is important for bearded dragons to avoid:

- sand, gravel, corn cob, walnut shell, kitty litter and wood shavings as substrates
- potentially toxic live plants