

Inland Bearded Dragon

(Pogona vitticeps)

Housing:

The larger the better when it comes to enclosures for adult bearded dragons. Hatchlings can be housed in as small as a 10-gallon enclosure, but a minimum size for an adult is a 50-gallon terrarium. Rubbermaid tubs also work well for groups of young dragons. We suggest a minimum 15 gallon tall tub, with the lid turned into a screen top. Cut a large hold in the top, and use Liquid Nails to glue the screen to the plastic top. Enclosures should typically be longer than they are high. Groups of adult dragons should be housed in larger enclosures with numerous logs for basking. Glass is a great choice for display of adult bearded dragons, allowing for optimum vision and brightness, but hatchlings often do better in enclosures that limit vision. It is also thought by many keepers that dragons display better colour when housed in enclosures that they cannot see out of. Please be wary of housing young females with males. Dragons may mate at young ages and run into complications with egg binding.

Substrate/cage decor:

Although sand has been used for many years, I recommend strongly to my customers to use wheat bran for bearded dragons above 6 month of-age. We suggest housing young bearded dragons on newspaper or paper towels to prevent problems with impaction. With newspaper, be aware that crickets will hide beneath the paper. We suggest that you replace the old paper with new paper nightly, allowing hidden crickets to be removed or eaten for a late night snack. Left over crickets can harm young dragons, so be careful. If there are extra crickets in the enclosure, provide them with food, so they do not nibble on your dragon at night. Basking logs should be placed within the enclosure to allow your dragon to thermoregulate and feel secure. Decorative rocks and fake plants may also help to liven up the enclosure. Do not use heat rocks. Bearded Dragons sense heat and light using a detector located on top of their heads. They are not as aware of heat coming from below and can badly burn their bellies without knowing it. For this reason we advise to not use a heat rock or place rocks too close to the basking light. Use wood logs for basking zones instead. Live plants may also be an option. (But live plants must not be toxic, as they will likely be dinner).

Lighting/heating:

Bearded dragons like it HOT! The key to heating your enclosure is providing a temperature gradient from a hot basking zone, to a cooler area. Basking temps should reach well over 100°F. The cooler zone should be around 85°F.

The brighter the light, the better. Dragons thrive under a good full spectrum UV source. We recommend active UV/heat or mercury vapour bulbs. These bulbs work double time to give your dragon quality UV and producing heat at the same time. You may also use fluorescent UV full spectrum tubes, although they do not produce the same UV quality. The colours and health of your lizard depend on good heat, bright light and UV. Your dragon will also benefit from natural sunlight and we recommend bringing your lizard outside in an outdoor basking enclosure. However the more natural sunlight you expose them to, the less supplements you should give, especially vitamin D3 (this may also be the case when using the active UV/heat bulbs). We also think that younger dragons may become stressed when taken outside, and therefore suggest holding off on outdoor excursions until your dragon is older.

Sexing:

Sexing dragons, especially young dragons, takes a lot of trial and effort. We personally feel it is not possible to 100% guarantee sex on young dragons. However there are differences between male and female dragons. Generally the male has a larger head, wider tail base, larger pores, and most noticeably,

hemipenal bulges. Young male dragons have two bulges, with a slight space between them just behind the vent. Lifting the tail and twisting gently may allow for the hemipenal bulges to appear more pronounced. Females generally have one central or no bulges where the hemipenes would be. However it's not uncommon for what is thought to be a female, to turn out to be an undeveloped (at the time of sexing) male, and vice versa.

Behaviour:

Bearded Dragons are generally not aggressive towards people, but will attack other dragons, and many other species of lizards, frogs, etc. Never put a small dragon with a larger one, as the small dragon may end up dinner. Beardies tend to spend the day running from one heat zone to the next, and often searching for food. A happy healthy dragon is alert, fast, and active. Young dragons can be kept in groups without too many problems associated with stress, but older males should be kept one to a cage. Breeding groups of 1 male and 2-5 females are not uncommon. Males will aggressively bob their heads at the females, while the females will wave their arms in circles back. Males and some females will also turn their beard jet black. These are part of the breeding rituals and territorial behaviours of bearded dragons. Adult Bearded dragons enjoy basking lazily on their logs. Your dragon may "vent" (open mouth breathing) while basking, this is very normal and not a sign of distress. It is also not uncommon to find a dragon sleeping at night in what appears to be the most painful position on earth.

Longevity:

A well cared for dragon will live from 6-12 years, maybe longer. The early years of a dragons life are often the most important. A young dragon that is not properly cared for is likely to have life long lasting problems. Proper exposure to UVB, vitamins, and minerals along with a well balanced diet in every stage of a dragon's life will help enable your dragon to have a long and healthy life.

Colours:

Many things influence a dragon's colour including stress, genes, and time of day. Many dragons seems to show their best colour when sleeping, or soaking in water; others may show their best colour when they are basking, excited, or for older dragons, after they have been exposed to natural sunlight. Any dragon can have colour, but you are more likely to get a high colour animal from breeding animals with high colour. Many breeders have worked with line breeding and today you can find a variety of colours of dragons (the most famous being the sandfire line of coloured dragons). It is actually a bit harder to find a "common" dragon these days than a coloured one. Many dragons will show more colour with age, but that is not always the rule. Colour is generally best on healthy happy dragons.

Also be aware that high colour is often achieved by inbreeding to different degrees. In order to achieve some of the flashy high colour that fetches big money in the market today, many breeders use inbreeding to "fix" genes. It is controversial as to how much damage inbreeding does to the health and hardiness of a dragon, and if there are methods of inbreeding that are more "safe" than others. Problems that have often been associated with inbreeding include general weakness and longevity issues, increased cancer rates, sight and neurological problems, size, and behaviour. As little as 3-5 years ago, average hatchling size was cited at about 4.5 inches. Today, it is not uncommon to see 2-3 inch hatchlings, with just over 3 inches as an average. (Some of these issues may also be attributed to many people breeding females at too young an age. A female should be at least 18 months old prior to breeding).

Colour "fixing" is handy for dealers in that it ensures that most of the clutches will turn out with similar high colour (ie. all bright orange), and often straight out-of-the-egg high colour. This can only be consistently achieved throughout an entire clutch by limiting the genetic diversity. If a clutch is genetically diverse, there should be a wide range of colours and patterns apparent in the hatchlings. Because of these issues, many breeders today chose to outcross their colour to different colour or "normal" dragons in order to "beef up" the genepool and increase the size and hardiness of the hatchlings.

We highly recommend outcrossing as much as possible. And remember, just because you acquired your dragons from different sources, does not mean that they are not related. If you cannot trace the lineage of your dragons, it is always safer to breed different colours together (ie. a dragon showing red colouration to one showing gold, or orange x normal, instead of red x red). We also find it is more exciting when we get a bunch of surprises with each group of hatchlings, instead of a bunch of look-alikes!

Feeding/supplementation:

Bearded dragons are omnivorous and should feed on both vegetation and protein. Crickets, mealworms, superworms (giant mealworms) and a salad mixture should be staple food sources. Never feed your dragon too large a prey item. We suggest feeding prey 1/2 to 3/4 the size of the space between your dragons eyes.

Dragons require a variety of greens including collard greens, red leaf lettuce, green leaf lettuce, mustard greens, turnip greens, and dandelion greens. Stay away from iceberg lettuce, large amounts of kale, cabbage, or spinach. We also suggest a variety of vegetables such as carrots, squash, sweet potatoes, peas, corn, and fruits offered in small amounts. Other specialty additions can include cactus fruit, dandelion flowers, and hibiscus flowers. This salad mix can be offered daily using different combinations of ingredients.

When feeding crickets, make sure your source of crickets is clean. You may gutload your crickets with commercial cricket and/or we suggest offering your crickets fresh fruit, greens, and water. Remove all old food from your cricket container. Mould can be toxic to your lizards. We suggest using a moistened paper towel/sponge, citrus, or carrots to provide water for your crickets.

Whenever possible try and provide a variety of appropriate sized prey items for your dragon including super worms, silk worms, roaches, grasshoppers, preying mantis, and a variety of other bugs (not fireflies). However we strongly suggest not using bugs found outside, as they may have pesticides that can kill your dragon. Also, use waxworms in limited amounts, if at all. They contain little nutritional value, and although relished by the dragons, contain high amounts of fat.

You can also feed rep cal pellets to your dragons at a young age. The best method we have found to start dragons on the pellets is to moisten the pellets, and drop them like crickets onto a paper plate in front of the dragons. This will generally trigger a feeding response from the dragons. Generally they will only eat a couple of pellets in the beginning, but with patience and age they will start to feed heavily on the pellets. The pellets have less risk of parasites, associated with much live prey.

You can also feed pinky mice/rats to adult dragons; this is especially good for females during the breeding season.

We feed all of our hatchlings a minimum of three times a day to ensure optimum growth and health. As dragons get older, their appetite will decrease. For adult dragons, you can offer greens daily and crickets or worms 3-4 times per week. As dragons get older, you may decrease the amount of protein offered. We suggest misting your dragons once a day, especially as hatchlings. Dragons will drink during spraying and may also be "trained" to drink and soak in a water dish inside the enclosure. They also enjoy an occasional warm (not hot) bath.

Supplementation:

There are many different and often contradictory opinions/views on supplementation. Calcium, D3, and vitamin supplementation are necessary for your dragons. However, supplementation will depend on what you feed your dragons, the bulbs you use, and how much natural sun they receive. Many sources recommend supplementing small dragons daily and decreasing to once or twice per week for adult dragons. But both too little and too much supplementation can lead to problems. Therefore, we

recommend going over this with your vet to find a schedule that suits the specific needs of your dragon. We suggest you supplement your young dragons daily with a ratio of 1 part Rep-Cal Herptivite to 3 parts Rep-Cal calcium with Vitamin D3.

Diseases & Disorders:

Bearded dragons are one of the hardiest reptiles available in the pet trade, yet they still can succumb to numerous diseases and problems.

Please do not use this information as a replacement for taking your lizard to a vet. This information is meant to raise your awareness of signs and possible problems. If you notice that your lizard is ill, do not hesitate to make an appointment with a reptile specialist.

Several pointers to ensure optimal health for your lizard:

Follow all housing, heating/lighting, and feeding/supplementation requirements for your lizard. Quarantine all new reptiles.

DO NOT HOUSE YOUR BEARDED DRAGON WITH ANY OTHER SPECIES OF REPTILE. Different reptiles come from many different environments requiring different needs in captivity. Even animals that come from similar environments can cause stress and pass parasites onto your dragon, costing the life of your lizard.

Do not house bearded dragons of different sizes together--this is a sure problem for the smaller dragons' health.

We recommend housing males separately. You may even need to prevent males from seeing each other across cages.

Keep your cages and food CLEAN! Clean and sift poop often. Remove all old food.

Wash your hands before and after handling your lizard. Be sure to sanitize hands in between handling different reptile species. (Hand sanitizer is a good thing to have handy).

Calcium/vitamin deficiency:

This is a serious problem that can have permanent effects on the life of your bearded dragon. Too little D3 and calcium can lead to metabolic bone disease. Some early symptoms of this problem include the shaking, twitching, or stiffness of limbs (especially rear legs), separation of the mouth, and difficulty chewing food. If this problem is caught early enough, supplementation and exposure to natural sun can be good remedies. Calcium deficiency is often seen in older dragons, or under supplemented dragons. There is also the possibility of over supplementing your dragons, causing a myriad of problems all its own.

Parasites:

There are numerous parasites that can become a problem for a bearded dragon. Many dragons live with these parasites without problems, but symptoms can often be triggered by stress (such as contact with another dragon or animal, change of enclosures, hibernation, breeding, etc.) Parasites often come from insects, greens, and/or unclean cage conditions so that it is imperative to keep proper hygiene in these areas. Clean cages often, sift faeces out daily, make sure that your insects are in clean environments, and remove all old food from your enclosure and your cricket/worm containers. Even fresh greens and fruit can harbour parasites, so wash them well. If you feed your dragon live insects it is probable that your dragon carries some level of coccidia and maybe pinworms. The idea is to keep the levels low.

Symptoms of a problematic parasite infestation include consistently runny and smelly stool (more foul smelling than normal), an inability to retain weight, loss of appetite, loss of weight. Do not hesitate to bring your lizard to a vet if you see these signs. Treatments are relatively easy to administer and successful, especially if the parasite is caught early.

Because of the high probability of your dragon carrying parasites, many vets recommend deworming dragons 1-2 times per year as a preventative measure similar to dogs and cats. However, new research does indicate that it might be best to only use medication if your dragon shows outward symptoms such as weight loss or lack of appetite. This is especially the case with antibiotics such as albion and with young dragons. It is a good idea to have medications on hand and we also recommend Parazap as a natural preventative and treatment (www.parazap.com).

Personally, we are against medicating young dragons unless absolutely necessary. We believe that the treatments can sometimes do more damage than good. However, we realize this is a controversial subject and much research still needs to be done. You must decide what works best for you. Be aware that parasite levels may hike during acclimation to a new home. We believe that if left alone, a young dragon can control and lower these levels on their own through "stress management".

Mites:

Since all bearded dragons are captive bred, mites should not be a problem. Although some pet stores keep less than sanitary conditions and mites may spread from animal to animal. These are small bugs that can be seen on the dragon. There are several products on the market that can take care of the problem. We recommend checking with your vet before administering these products.

Adenovirus:

This is a virus that we know little about at this point. It seems to most strongly affect hatchlings and is deadly. To prevent infection, follow strict quarantine procedures for all new animals. Adenovirus has the potential of devastating entire collections. Along with Adenovirus, "yellow fungus" is another concern that may or may not be related to adenovirus. This affliction also seems to affect young dragons and can be quite contagious and deadly. Again, little is known about this problem. If you see unusual spotting that does not disappear with sheds, bring your dragon to a vet for a culture. Inform the vet that the culture for yellow fungus takes longer and traditional antibiotics do not work. Anti-fungal or yeast medications seem to be the best. More information on these problems is available on the internet. www.reptilerooms.com would be a good place to start.

Egg Binding:

Egg binding can happen for several reasons but is more likely to happen during the first breeding cycle with infertile eggs. This can be a serious problem and should be discussed with a vet. Suggestions for prevention include making sure the female is old enough, big enough, and healthy enough to breed; making sure that proper supplementation has been in place during her growth period, making a suitable lay spot available, and avoiding stress to the animal.

Respiratory Problems:

Clogged nostrils, the presence of mucous and open mouth (often raspy) breathing (do not confuse this with venting due to heat) are signs of respiratory problems. These problems are often due to low heat conditions and excessive moisture. Be sure to check your temperatures and humidity levels, and contact your vet for treatment.

Brumation:

A brumation or hibernation period is considered necessary for breeding cycles. Many bearded dragons will brumate or slow down eating and activity during winter months even without initiating any change in

lighting and heat conditions. You may winter your dragons for approximately a two month period. We suggest following the natural light cycle and wintering during December-February. A slow reduction in daylight hours until you reach 8-10 hours of light per day helps to ease dragons into a brumation period. A temperature drop should also occur gradually until day temps are between 75-85°F and night temps can drop to around 60°F. Bearded dragons can safely tolerate temps down to the 50s. Before putting a dragon "down", be sure that your dragon is healthy and is free of undigested food. You may choose to provide a space in the enclosure for burrowing (we find aspen works well for this). Often dragons will dig and bury themselves for the winter. If you notice your dragon up and about, small amounts of food can be offered. A heavy hibernation period may not be necessary for many bearded dragons. When the winter period is over, slowly raise temperature levels to suggested highs and increase the photoperiod until it is around 14 hours of day to 10 hours of dark.

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