

Pet Care Advice

Caring for your Bearded Dragon

The Inland Bearded Dragon lives in the arid woodlands and deserts of central Australia. It spends much of its waking hours in bushes and trees, and basking on rocks. When it is extremely hot, the bearded dragon will burrow underground. The bearded dragon is diurnal (active during the day) and an omnivore (eats both plants and insects or small prey). It forages for food such as insects, small lizards and mammals, fruit, flowers, and other plant material during the day time.

What do we need to provide?

Many of the common health problems we see in bearded dragons are caused by incorrect housing and diet. There are several important features we need to provide for bearded dragons we are keeping as pets to ensure they stay healthy.

These include:

- a secure enclosure
- suitable substrate
- landscaping and furniture
- appropriate temperature gradient
- appropriate humidity
- ultraviolet light
- appropriate food and water



Vivaria (glass walled or fronted enclosures) are most commonly used to house bearded dragons. If wood is used to make the vivarium this should be properly sealed to facilitate cleaning. The vivarium should not be kept in direct sunlight as they can easily overheat. Ensure that the vivarium is secure and well ventilated. The enclosure should be as big as possible but a tank measuring 4ft x 2ft x 2ft is the minimum size for 1-2 adults.

Substrate

The substrate is what lines the bottom of the cage. Substrate can be flat newspaper, sheets of brown wrapping paper (the kind that comes in rolls), reptile matting or cork or slate tiles. **DO NOT** use cedar shavings, gravel, crushed corn cob, cat litter, wood shavings, or potting soil that contains vermiculite, pesticides, fertilizer, or wetting agents. In particular, avoid Calcsand. Although this is commonly sold as safe for reptiles it can cause eye problems and intestinal blockages. Sand easily sticks to food and so can be ingested, building up in the intestines, particularly in young dragons and so is not recommended if you feed your bearded dragon in his or her vivarium.

Humidity

Proper humidity is necessary for proper shedding. Especially during the winter months when the humidity is low, mist the Bearded Dragon with water several times a week. Some Bearded Dragons appear to enjoy soaking in a tub of clean water. Bearded Dragons have the same body temperature as their surroundings. They come from arid woodland and desert environments, and require supplemental heat to be healthy and carry out their bodily functions such as digestion. They prefer 78-88°F during the day and temperatures in the 70's at night. If a reptile is cold, it cannot properly digest its food and is more likely to become ill. Lizards like a temperature gradient so if they are cold, they can move to a warmer part of the cage and vice versa. Place a good quality thermostat in the cage at the level the Bearded Dragon spends most of its time so that the temperature is automatically regulated.

Landscaping

Furniture should be provided for climbing and basking. These should be secure and should be as wide as the width of the bearded dragon. Hiding places should be provided

Primary heat source

This is necessary to keep the temperature of the entire cage within the proper range. A ceramic infrared heat emitters or panels which produce heat, but little visible light, can be used. Fire alarms should be placed in rooms where lights or other heat sources are used.

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Secondary heat source

This creates more heat in specific areas of the cage to provide a temperature gradient. To best supply this gradient, the secondary heat source should cover only 25-30% of the surface of the enclosure. There are also special 'basking lights' available. Either type of light should shine down on a particular basking area from outside the cage or from behind a guard. The temperature under the light in the area in which the Bearded Dragon would be basking should be 95-100°F. Do not use hot rocks as heat sources as these can cause serious burns

Lighting

Visible white light

In addition to heat, incandescent bulbs also provide visible white light. A combination of fluorescent and incandescent light fixtures can be used to provide visible light to all areas of the enclosure.

Ultraviolet light

In addition to heat and white light, bearded dragons must have access to natural sunlight for good health. This is because they need a certain spectrum of ultraviolet (UV) light called UVB. UVB is necessary for the bearded dragon to make Vitamin D. No artificial light is as good as sun in providing UVB, so when the outside temperature on a sunny day is over 70°F, place your Bearded Dragon outside in a secure screen or wire cage with a locking door. Provide some shade and a hiding place within the enclosure. UV rays do not penetrate window glass so bearded dragons placed in a sunny window are not receiving UV light.

When a bearded dragon does not have access to bright sunlight, special lights are used to provide the UVB light. You need a light which emits light in the 290-320 nanometer range. Lights producing only UVB, and lights which produce a combination of UVB and white lights designed specifically for reptiles are available. These UVB light sources should be replaced every 6 months.

It is recommended that the UVB light source should be less than 18 inches from where the Bearded Dragon spends most of its time; 10-12 inches is optimal.

The areas illuminated by the incandescent basking light and the UV light should overlap. If the Bearded Dragon spends almost all his time basking under the incandescent light, and the UV light is at the other end of the cage, he is not going to receive any benefit from it.

Diet

Bearded Dragons are omnivores and can eat a range of insects, fruit and vegetables. They can eat crickets, mealworms, kingworms, waxworms, earthworms, cockroaches and locusts as a form of meat. Figs, kiwi, melon, apples, mango, papaya, dates, peaches, apricots and plums as fruit and broccoli, peas, green beans, courgette, butternut squash, sweet potato and bell peppers as vegetables. They also eat greens such as kale, parsley, clover, dandelion greens, turnip greens and mustard greens.

Veterinary Care

Most of the medical problems experienced by bearded dragons can be prevented by paying close attention to good husbandry and nutrition but they can still develop just as many health problems as any other pet.

Often a bearded dragon will try to conceal signs of ill health so if you are worried in any way seek prompt veterinary advice.

Common problems to look out for include weight loss, diarrhoea, retained skin especially around the head, eyes and digits, loss of appetite or constipation.

Our vets can advise you about your pet's health and will be happy to answer any questions you may have. Rather than wait for a problem to occur why not make an appointment for your bearded dragon to have a regular check up, just as you would with a dog or cat.

