

Lizard – Bearded Dragon

Are you considering a Bearded Dragon as a companion? Here is some information to get you started. Bearded Dragons (or Beardies as affectionately known) make fantastic pets.

Housing

Be prepared for your Beardie's home to grow with them. A 20-gallon starter kit will only last for so long. As an adult, the minimum size of their enclosure should be 40 gallons, but bigger is always better.



Beardies are daytime desert dwellers, so proper light and heat are essential for a healthy Beardie. They should also have a hot and cool side to their enclosure. Normal daytime temperatures should range between 28 – 31 Celsius. Night time temperatures 21 -26 Celsius and their basking spot should be 35 – 40 Celsius.

UVB lights are very important. They allow your pet to produce vitamin D3, which is essential for good bone health. A linear tube rather than a coiled light gives the best UVB exposure. UV bulbs should be replaced every 6 months, even if the light is still working (as the UV may not be as strong). UVB does not travel through glass, and the bulb should be no more than 12-18 inches from your bearded dragon in order for the UVB to reach their skin.

Enclosure décor is completely up to you, keeping in mind that it must withstand an active lizard climbing on, over and possibly under it.

Substrate – there is a lot of controversy over substrates. Loose substrate should never be used for hatchlings and juveniles as they do tend to eat it as well as their food. Sub-adults and adults can be given a 50-50 mix of children's play sand and reptile soil. Loose substrate encourages their natural behaviour to dig and can help to keep their nails trimmed down. Some owners opt for reptile carpeting (which contains no threads that can be ingested or wrapped around toes) for all or part of the substrate.

Cleaning

Beardies are messy. A quick spot clean to remove any fecal matter or leftover greens should be done every day or every other day. A full clean of the entire enclosure should be done at least every 3 months. A reptile-safe disinfectant or a vinegar and water solution can be used to scrub the enclosure before setting it back up.

Diet

Bearded Dragons are omnivores. As hatchlings and juveniles, their protein requirements are higher than as adults. Good protein sources include crickets, mealworms, phoenix worms, waxworms, butterworms and silkworms. Hornworms are a fantastic treat and should be fed sparingly. Sub-adults and adults can have pinky mice as a treat.

Baby bearded dragons (hatchling to 5 months old) should be fed approximately 60% – 80% insects and 20% – 40% plant matter. If feeding crickets, stick to very small prey, no more than the space between your beardie's eyes. Larger crickets can have too much exoskeleton and be difficult to digest. Juvenile bearded dragons (5 months old to 18 months old) should be fed approximately 50% insect prey and 50% plant matter. Adult bearded dragons (over 18 months in age) require about 25% – 30% insect prey and about 70% – 75% plant matter in their diet. Often this means feeding greens daily, but insects only a few times a week. Offer as many insects as your beardie will eat in about 10 minutes. Remove any leftover insects.

Gut loading: It is essential to feed healthy insects to your lizard so that it will also be healthy. Immediately after purchase, insects may be in poor health, as they are sometimes poorly fed prior to being sold. It is a good idea to keep your insects at home for 4-5 days, in a clean enclosure with fresh foods available, prior to feeding them to your lizard.

Staple greens include collards, dandelion greens, endive, escarole, mustard greens, turnip greens, and watercress.

Staple vegetables include acorn squash, butternut squash, green beans, parsnips, okra, snap peas, sweet potato and yellow squash. Staple fruits include mango, papaya and prickly pear.

Water should be available in a shallow dish.

Handling

When handling your Beardie, you want to be calm and non-threatening – so slow and easy. Bearded dragons feel secure when their entire body is supported on your hand or arm. For the first little bit, you want to offer your Beardie your hand, palm up and give them the option to step onto your hand if they choose to. Don't force them to be handled as it may cause them to become stressed and not trust you, which could end up with you getting "spiked". They use the spikes on their sides as a defence mechanism, and if they feel threatened, they will use them on whatever is close to them – usually your hand. Sessions should be short and positive at first, gradually leading up to longer periods of time.

If children wish to hold the Beardie, an adult should be present at all times to rescue the Beardie if need be.

Enrichment

Enrichment can include many things, from how you set up your Beardies' enclosure to dog toys that are lizard safe. Many of the puzzles or slow feeders created for dogs make your Beardie ponder how they will get their treats out to eat them. Another dog toy known as a Ho-lee roller stuffed with yummy greens not

only adds enrichment but can also add exercise to your Beardie's day as the ball rolls. They have to chase it.

Many bearded dragons enjoy bathing. If you decide to bathe our bearded dragon, ensure the water is warm and shallow enough to hold their head out of water. Change the water immediately if they have a bowel movement in the water (this seems to be a favourite time to do that!) and disinfect the tub or container when they are finished. **Bearded dragons with other pets**

Your Beardie should not interact with other pets as it can be dangerous for all involved.

Final Words

Always remember to thoroughly wash your hands when you have finished doing anything with or for your reptile friend.

Some information courtesy of ZooMed Laboratories and Reptifiles.