

Bearded Dragon Husbandry

I have been asked by many of my customers to provide them with an overview of what they will need to properly take care of a bearded dragon. Your dragon is guaranteed to be completely healthy upon receipt and if you follow the guidelines below, you will be able to enjoy your dragon for many years.

Housing- When considering enclosures, remember that bearded dragons grow quickly. You will be able to start out with a 10 or 20 gallon long tank but by the time they are 6-12 months of age, they are going to require at least a 40 gallon breeder tank. Lots of bearded dragon owners prefer custom built cages. I personally use some custom enclosures from BoaMaster. I really like the fact that they have the screen top so your lighting can be located outside of the cage. I also really like the hinged front door which makes getting your dragon in and out much easier than having to deal with a screen lid on a tank. Another big bonus is that your lights don't have to be moved whenever you are taking your dragon in and out of his cage which will increase their lifetime.

For substrate, I would stick with paper towels, reptile carpet, or newspaper for young dragons. Once they get around 6 months of age, you can put them on very fine sand like Repti-Sand. Do not use Calci-Sand. There have been too many reports of impaction as the Calci-Sand seems to clump together when wet. Be very careful with any substrate you use. It's best to feed your beardie its insects outside of their regular enclosure to make sure they don't ingest anything they aren't supposed to. I have even seen a piece of paper towel cause a problem. It just isn't worth it.

Whatever type of enclosure you choose, KEEP IT CLEAN! I highly recommend using Chlorhexidine solution for all of your cleaning needs. It's much easier than bleach to work with and it is just as effective. This product is sold as a concentrate and a little goes a long way. Just follow the directions on the bottle. I order my Chlorhexidine solution from the good folks at Reptile Basics. The company Natural Chemistry also makes a great product called Healthy Habitat that can be used both for spot cleaning and thorough enclosure cleaning. You should be thoroughly cleaning your enclosure once a week and spot cleaning daily. Bleach is an option for the thorough cleaning. Just make sure you rinse until you can't smell bleach any more. Even after all that, I put everything I can in the sun to dry out.

Lighting- Bearded dragons need to be provided UVB!! Obviously most of us cannot keep our dragons outside year round as much as we would like. There are a couple of good ways to provide your dragon the wavelengths he needs. You could just pick up a lower cost incandescent bulb for basking and combine that with a ReptiSun 10 for the UVB. Another option would be to go with a mercury vapor bulb. There are many manufacturers of these bulbs and personally the only one that I have had any luck with is the Mega Ray bulb from ReptileUV.com. This bulb is great and I highly recommend it. Even though this bulb is an "all in one", I still recommend putting at least a small fluorescent bulb on the side of your enclosure

opposite the MVB bulb. These will keep the entire cage lit up nicely which dragons appreciate. Remember, 12 hours on and 12 hours off.

Temperature- Directly related to lighting is the very important topic of temperature. I cannot stress enough how important temperature is to your bearded dragon. Your temperature source for your dragon comes from your lighting. Your dragon should have options when it comes to the temperature it wants to be in. You need to offer a basking site which needs to be at least 100F-110F and then you need to offer an area in the enclosure that stays around 80F. Make sure you KNOW the temperatures in your enclosure. Invest in a temperature gun (I like RayTek's guns) or a good digital thermometer. All of your beardies metabolic functions are related to temperature. Your beardies heat source should always come from above and never below. Never use under tank heaters, heating pads or hot rocks. Your dragon shouldn't need any heat sources at night. That is unless the room in your house where the dragon's enclosure is kept dips below 68F. If it does, you should use a ceramic heater to provide some supplemental heat.

Feeding- Young bearded dragon's diets should consist mostly of live insects. Opinions differ on what the exact ratio of animal protein is to vegetables but I believe it is close to 90% live food and 10% veggies. These numbers tend to be completely opposite as dragons age but adult dragons still enjoy their share of live feeder insects.

Bearded dragons should be offered freshly cut vegetables every day. Beardies at my breeding facility receive a variety of veggies including collard greens, kale, mustard greens, and turnip greens. They also love hibiscus leaves and dandelions. The website, "Beautiful Dragons" has an awesome nutritional reference sheet on it. Refer to this to make sure you are feeding vegetables that are the most beneficial for your beardie. Obviously, make sure they have not been sprayed with any insecticides or herbicides. Offer your dragons greens early in the day so they have ample time to digest them. I always use a spray bottle with water and mist the greens to help ensure my dragons stay hydrated. Hydration is very important with all beardies but especially so for baby beardies under the age of 10 weeks. You can also offer water to these smaller dragons with an eye dropper. Just let it drip on their nose and you will see them lick it up as the water rolls down toward their mouth. Many bearded dragon owners, me included, periodically mist their dragons as well to ensure adequate hydration. Soaking your dragon in shallow warm water is also very effective to help keep them hydrated. Remember that dragons don't like high humidity levels so I wouldn't recommend keeping any water in their enclosure as that would drive up the humidity to unsafe levels.

I like to offer younger dragons insects 2-3 times per day. I do not like to offer any animal protein source after 6:00PM if I can help it. Crickets seem to be the primary feeder insect and the one most readily available at your locally owned pet store. They are fine IF THEY ARE FED PROPERLY and if they are gut loaded 48 hours prior to feeding them to your dragon. Otherwise, don't think they are getting any nutritional value out of them because they aren't. I prefer to feed Dubia roaches. Chris at The Feeder Store.com is a great source for these and

other species of roaches. There are a lot of advantages to feeding roaches to your bearded dragon. As with the cricket, it is important to feed your roaches a proper diet to ensure your dragon optimal nutrition. REMEMBER, WHAT GOES INTO YOUR FEEDER GOES INTO YOUR BEARDED DRAGON!!

Bearded Dragons can easily become impacted by eating feeder insects that are too large. Impaction can be fatal. A rule of thumb that you hear and read about a lot is not to feed your dragon any insect that is longer than the space b/w their eyes. This is a rule I follow with everything except roaches. They don't contain as much chitin in their exoskeleton as crickets do but don't overdo it.

Some other common feeder insects are hornworms, silkworms, phoenix worms, and superworms. Be careful with the superworms and don't overdo it. I have had several customers feed their dragons "lots" of them and it has led to major problems. Offer them as a treat. DO NOT FEED MEALWORMS TO YOUR DRAGON!

Remember to dust your feeder insects with calcium once a day. I like to put my insects into a Ziploc sandwich bag and get them covered nicely before offering them to the dragons. Use calcium with D3 if your dragon doesn't receive sufficient UVB lighting. Dragons that I keep under Reptile UV bulbs just receive straight calcium. I also dust with Herptivite supplement by Rep-Cal on Sundays to get some additional vitamins and minerals into my dragons.

Some other important things to remember:

Give your dragon a bath periodically. Most enjoy it and it helps to ensure proper hydration. Most will defecate in their bath which makes clean up much easier than them doing it in their enclosure. Make sure you disinfect afterwards!

NEVER feed any insects caught around the house or in the yard. **NEVER feed your bearded dragons lightning bugs (aka fireflies).** They are toxic and just one will kill your beardie.

Get your dragon outside whenever temperatures allow it. Never leave them in full sun as they may overheat. Always provide a shady area and always protect them from predators.

Please do not hesitate to call me if you have any questions at all. 919-844-6880. Thank you!