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Bearded Dragon Care

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Captive care – Bearded dragons are Agamids belonging to the genus *Pogona* (formerly *Amphibolurus*) which has multiple species. Beardies are *Pogona vitticeps*. They are active during the day and terrestrial to semi-arboreal, spending most of their time in bushes and trees, basking on rocks and escaping the heat with underground burrows

Bearded dragons arm wave to show submission to avoid aggression, and a head-bobbing to show dominance over other males and signal females they would like to mate with them. Their beard becomes blacker during rivalry between males, but can also turn black to absorb heat or when they are upset. In the wild bearded dragons are solitary. In captivity males will fight with other males and should be housed singly, or in groups of two or more females. Juveniles can be raised in screened 10 to 20 gallons aquariums, adults need 50 gallon aquariums, minimum, or larger. Newspaper, paper towels, or paper pulp substrate work well. Sand, gravel, crushed walnut shells, Sanichips, and many other substrates can cause constipation. Climbing branches, cork bark hides, basking rocks and burrowing areas, such as a humid retreat, should be available. Bearded dragons don't drink well from water bowls. Shallow water bowls, large enough to climb into, are good. Encourage drinking by dripping or spraying water on the dragon's head, spraying the sides of the enclosure, or soaking in shallow lukewarm water several times per week. Lack of drinking available water is a major cause of constipation.

Cage temperature should be 60 - 75° F at night, rising to 85 – 95° F during the day, with a basking area of 95 - 105° F. Hatchling and juveniles shouldn't drop below 70° F. It is important to provide a thermogradient so dragons can select and control their own temperature. Overhead self-ballasted mercury vapor lamps (Powersun, Zoo Med, San Lois Obispo) are recommended for basking sites to provide both ultraviolet (UV) light and heat. Do not allow dragons to get closer than 12 inches to lights or dorsal burns may result. Photoperiod should be 12 hours light and 12 hours dark, except during hibernation. Replace UV lights every 6 months as UV output falls before visible light burns out, or check with a UV meter.

Feeding - In the wild juveniles consume 50% plant material and 50% animal material, adults consume 90% plant material and 10% animal material. Suitable vegetables include calcium dusted dark leafy greens (kale, collards, mustards, turnip, radish or beet tops, spinach, dandelions, escarole, cabbage, bok choy, broccoli rabe, and lettuces such as Romaine, red leaf, green leaf or Boston lettuces, but not iceberg lettuce), carrots, squash, zucchini, peas and beans. Flowers such as roses, nasturtiums, carnations and hibiscus are also good. Dragons should be fed a wide variety of insects including mealworms, crickets, super worms, waxworms, Dubia cockroaches, black soldier fly larvae, locusts, silkworms, butter worms, grasshoppers and tomato hornworms. Insects should be well fed before becoming prey and insects that can be gut loaded should be fed a commercial gut loading diet with > 6% calcium (such as Mazuri Hi Ca Cricket Diet), nothing else, besides water. Gut loading cubes are nutritionally worthless. Commercial pelleted (not cubed) bearded dragon foods can also be fed. Baby mice can be offered several times per month. Even though bearded dragons love fruits, they are not recommended, because they are too high in sugars and not part of their natural diet. Overfeeding, obesity and fatty livers are a major problem in captivity. Juvenile growing animals can be fed daily, adults should be fed every other day to every third day if obese. Growing dragons need more calcium than adults. Calcium is provided in calcium rich insect gut loading diets, dusted on insects or sprinkled on food. Multivitamins can be given twice a month, if fortified foods, such as commercial gut loading diets, or commercial pellets, are not part of the diet. Feed as much variety as possible.

Reproduction – Bearded dragons are easy to breed and prolific. Breeding occurs during the spring and summer. Mature male dragons have larger femoral pores compared to females. In males, if the tail is lifted, two bulges are visible at the base of the tail while looking straight down the tail. Males have larger heads and more prominent darker beards as well. Females reach sexual maturity between 18 to 24 months of age, sooner is possible with optimal nutrition but breeding younger dragons is not recommended. A winter cool down from mid-December to mid-February with a 10 hours light, 14 hours dark, photoperiod helps synchronize breeding. Most dragons are already off feed by this time. Night time temperatures should drop to 60 - 75° F with a daytime basking around 80° F. Water should be provided, either by soaking, sprinkling or spraying it on their head (unless they drink from a water bowl). In mid to late February photoperiod and temperatures can slowly be increased to 12 hrs. light and 80° F ambient, with a hot spot of 95-105° F, and a night time drop to 70 - 75° F. Appetite should return after a few warmer days and dragons should be fed heavily in preparation for breeding within a month. As females become obviously gravid, appetite decreases, the female is more active and will be digging, until she stops eating altogether for a few days prior to egg laying. A nest area should be present with at least 10 to 12 inches of sandy soil, such as a box, or 8 to 10 gallon plastic tub. The female will excavate a burrow and lay eggs in the late afternoon or early evening, then fill in the burrow. Oviposition commences 4 to 6 weeks after copulation, females average 15 to 25 eggs and 2 to 7 clutches per year, at 4 to 6 week intervals. Eggs should be incubated at 82 - 86° F in a mixture of vermiculite and water at a ratio of 1:1 to 1:2, by weight. Damp Perlite, sand or soil can also be used. Fertile eggs will chalk up and enlarge. Eggs hatch in an average of 2 months

but can range from 50 to 80 days. Allow hatchlings to emerge on their own, within 24 to 36 hrs. of piping, and remain in the incubator a day or two after hatching, to absorb yolks, then transfer them to a cage with damp paper towels, mist twice a day. Any remaining umbilical yolk will be absorbed and the dragons usually start taking crickets and finely chopped greens within several days. Hatchlings can be housed communally until size discrepancies emerge, at which point they should be separated. Bearded dragons are cannibalistic, cage mate trauma is common.

Even if you aren't breeding your dragons the winter cool down is needed to reduce fat reserves and keep your dragon healthy. If your dragon isn't eating or pooping for more than a week, is not lifting its body and tail base off the ground while walking, has difficulty breathing, seems lethargic, sleeps all the time, or you think something is wrong, it should be examined a reptile veterinarian.