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Bearded Dragon Care (2/25)

Thomas H. Boyer, DVM, DABVP, Reptile and Amphibian Practice
9888-F Carmel Mountain Road, San Diego, CA, 92129, (858) 484-3490

The inland, or central, bearded dragon, *Pogona vitticeps,* is the most popular lizard in captivity. 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. They have extensive fat pads that allow them to hibernate, or brumate, in the winter. In the wild bearded dragons are solitary. In captivity males will fight with other males and should be housed singly, or with 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. Indoor outdoor carpeting, newspaper, paper towels, or paper pulp substrate work well. Sand, gravel, crushed walnut shells, Sani chips, and many other substrates can cause constipation and are not recommended. 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. Encourage drinking by soaking the dragon in shallow lukewarm water (no deeper than wrist level) several times per week while dripping or spraying water on the dragon's head. Lack of drinking water is a major cause of constipation. Cage temperature should be 65 - 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. Provide a thermogradient so dragons can select and control their own temperature. Overhead self-ballasted mercury vapor lamps (100-watt Powersun, Zoo Med) are recommended for basking sites to provide both ultraviolet (UV) light and heat. Limit UV B exposure to less than 6 hours per day to decrease skin tumors. Do not allow dragons to get closer than 12 inches to lights or skin burns may result. Photoperiod should be 12 hours light and 12 hours dark, except during hibernation (see following). Replace UV lights every 6 months, as UV output of the light decreases well before visible light burns out or check UV output with a UV meter. There should be no light of any color at night, not even red, blue, or purple.

Feeding - In the wild juveniles are mainly insectivorous and eat more plants as they get older. Aim for a diet that is half greens, pelleted diets and flowers and half insects. Suitable vegetables include calcium dusted low protein greens such as dandelions, cabbage and clover. Other 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) are OK but should be fed less because of their higher protein content. Flowers such as roses, nasturtiums, carnations and hibiscus can also be fed. Dragons should be fed a wide variety of insects including crickets, Dubia cockroaches, grasshoppers, katydids, locusts, and larval insects including mealworms, super worms, waxworms, black soldier fly larvae, silkworms, butter worms, 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 > 8% calcium (such as Mazuri Hi Ca Cricket Diet), nothing else, besides water. Gut loading cubes are nutritionally worthless (**see Feeding Insectivorous Reptiles and Amphibians**) and should not be used. Less than half the insects fed should be larval insects, because they are too high in fat, except for hornworms and silkworms. Commercial pelleted bearded dragon foods can also be fed, some good brands include Mazuri, Zoo Med and ExoTerra. Baby mice can be offered but no more than two per month. Even though bearded dragons love fruits, they are not recommended, because they are too high in sugar, not part of their natural diet and are the major risk factor for dental disease. Overfeeding, obesity and fatty livers are a major concerns in captivity. Juvenile growing animals can be fed daily, adults should be fed no more every other day to every third day. Growing dragons need more calcium than adults. Calcium (such as Repashey SuperCal LoD) is provided in calcium rich insect gut loading diets, dusted on insects or sprinkled on greens. 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!

Hibernation – A winter hibernation from December through February, with a 10 hours light, 14 hours dark, photoperiod helps uses up excess fat reserves and is recommended for all healthy adult dragons. Many dragons go off feed in winter. Nighttime temperatures should drop to 55 - 70° F with a daytime basking less than 80° F. Water should be provided, by soaking, and dripping water on their head. In early March, photoperiod and temperatures can be increased to 12 hrs. light and 80° F ambient, with a hot spot of 95-105° F, and a night time no lower than 65 - 70° F. Appetite should return after a few warmer days and dragons should be fed heavily if being bred.

Bearded dragons are easy to breed and prolific. Breeding occurs during the spring and summer. 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. Oviposition commences 4 to 6 weeks after copulation. A nest area should bepresent 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. Females average 15 to 25 eggs/clutch 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 could also be used. Fertile eggs will chalk up and enlarge. Eggs hatch in an average of 2 months, but pipping can range from 50 to 80 days. Allow hatchlings to emerge on their own, usually within 24 to 36 hrs. of piping. Keep them 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.

If you do not plan on breeding your female dragon, she should be spayed in her first few years. 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 2 weeks, has difficulty breathing, seems lethargic, sleeps all the time, or you think something is wrong, contact us.