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Bearded Dragons - Care Sheet **(Pogona Vitticeps)**

Introduction

These gentle beasts are from Australia but are now readily available due to their willingness to breed in captivity. Bearded Dragons make a wonderful pet for both beginners and advanced reptile keepers. Due to their docile nature and relative small size (usually 16-20 inches) they have become quite popular in recent years. These beautiful creatures are highly recommended for families with small children also due to their seeming love for attention.

Choosing your Bearded Dragon

When you decide to buy a Bearded Dragon, whether from a breeder or Pet store, look it over carefully. Some things you should notice right away is how alert and active the Dragon is, you don't want a Beardie that can't lift it's head or looks lethargic. When you walk up to the enclosure the Beardies should be watching you with interest and should have bright and alert eyes. You also want to check them for sores, burns, external parasites or any deformities. Make sure there is no pus or other gunk built up in the eyes, nose or mouth area also. Many Beardies will be missing toes or bits of their tail, this will not cause them any discomfort as long as the wound looks healed and shows no sign of infection. One of the most important things in my eyes is to look at the size of the Beardie. I do not recommend Beardies under 6 inches in total length. Baby Beardies can be very fragile and more apt to become ill or overly stressed. It much easier to care for a more developed Bearded Dragon.

Housing

Young Beardies under 10 inches in length can be housed in a 20gal long aquarium. This will last them for a few months only though as they grow quickly. Adult Dragons should be housed in nothing smaller than a 40gal breeder tank. I prefer using 55gal aquariums due to the extra length it gives them to run and they are easily found at most Pet stores. Screen lids should be used for the top of any aquarium style cages you use. Do not use glass, plexiglass or wood to cover your cages. This will not allow enough air circulation and will also trap humidity in the cage. Screen tops allow air flow, allow your lighting and heat sources to work correctly and also allow humidity to escape.

Lighting

Bearded Dragons require full spectrum lighting for 12-14 hours a day. I happen to use the Reptisun 5.0 or 8.0 fluorescent bulbs. There is also other brands available such as the Reptiglo or lumichrome bulbs. These fluorescent bulbs should stretch the length of your Beardies enclosure and your B.D. should be able to come within 6-8 inches of the light. The UV light should be placed over the cage and **not directed through the glass**, glass will deflect the UV rays. Follow the directions on the package of the bulb for replacement frequency.

Heating and temps

To produce heat and a basking spot in your enclosure you can use either a ceramic heat emitter, a reptile basking light (red, blue or white) or just a plain old household light bulb. The best fixture for any of these choices is a porcelain dome light fixture. This type of fixture is a must with a ceramic heat emitter due to the amount of heat they produce. The temperature for this basking spot you created should be around 110f for juveniles and can be around 95f for adults. Although I don't recommend any temps above 110f, within a few degrees of these basking temps will be sufficient.

The cool side of the enclosure should be around 85f during the day. Once again within a few degrees of this temp is just fine.

Nighttime temperatures can fall as low as 65f. It is fairly easy to keep your night temps above this even in the winter. If you can't keep your temps above this you may want to consider buying an under tank heater (UTH) for nighttime use. Using this just during the evening hours will help create a warm spot for your Dragon to sleep. **DO NOT** use heat rocks as these can cause serious burns on your animal's underside.

A thermometer on the "hot side" and one on the "cool side" will make sure that your temps are in the range they should be in.

Substrate

For baby to juvenile Bearded Dragons I prefer and recommend either newspaper, paper towels, butcher paper or reptile carpet. These choices are cheap, easy to clean and hold no health risks to your animal. If using reptile carpet the stuff that looks and feels like grass is the best. The felt kind has little loops of fabric that may catch the nails of your Dragon and cause injury. **DO NOT** use sand, shavings or any other loose substrate for baby to juvenile Beardies. They can be very clumsy eaters and they are also very curious and like to taste everything. Any kind of loose substrate holds serious health risks to your Beardie. If they eat a loose substrate they can become impacted, which is a blocking of the intestines, and die.

For adult Dragons I prefer either the grass repti carpet or playsand. Washed playsand is much cheaper than all those fancy colored reptile sands and looks just as good. You can buy this playsand at most larger Hardware stores for under \$4 for 50lbs.

Crushed walnut shell is dangerous and should only be used to clean up oil spills. This substrate is NOT digestible and if too much of it is eaten it will cause impaction. I have seen this occur first hand with reptiles ranging from lizards to tortoise. Stay away from this product please.

Feeding and diet

Bearded Dragons are omnivorous, meaning that they eat both animal and plant matter. Any and all food items that your Bearded Dragons eat should be **no bigger** than the space between their eyes. If the food items are bigger than the space between their eyes it can cause impaction and/or hind leg paralysis. Either way your Beardie will suffer horribly.

Baby and juvenile Beardies should be offered appropriately sized crickets two-three times a day. Offer as many as your Beardie will eat in a 5-10 minute time frame. When your Beardie stops eating, stop offering. Young Bearded Dragons can eat anywhere from 20-60 small crickets a day. Your Beardie should also be given fresh greens daily. Spraying the greens with water will help them last longer and will also help keep your Beardie hydrated.

Sub-adult to adult Beardies only need to eat prey items once a day along with fresh greens. Once they are this age you can also offer them Locusts, Cockroaches, Mealworms, Waxworms, Zophobas worms, Silkworms, Butterworms, Red worms, Earthworms and just about any other worm available. All these should be used as treats though with crickets and greens being the stable part of your Dragons diet. **DO NOT** feed your Beardie insects that you have caught in your backyard. These bugs could have parasites that could be passed on to your Beardie or they could have been exposed to poisons that could kill your Beardie. **Lightning bugs** can also kill your Beardie so it is much safer to stay away from wild caught insects.

Prey items should be dusted once a day with a calcium/vitamin D3 supplement such as Rep-cal makes. All prey items should be dusted once a week with a multivitamin supplement such as Herptivite, also made by Rep-cal.

Any uneaten prey items should be removed from your Dragons enclosure.

There is a wide variety of greens that are available that are good for your Beardie. Dandelion greens, Collard greens, Mustard greens, Bok choy, Kale, Turnip greens, Escarole and Chicory are among the easiest to find and the best to use. If the greens you are wondering about say Lettuce anywhere in the name **avoid** them. Most types of lettuce are composed mostly of water and hold little or no nutritional value. With the wide variety of other greens out there it is better and easier to just avoid any type of lettuce. Spinach should also be avoided as calcium binds to it and will not be digested by your animal.

A wide variety of vegetables can also be offered to your Beardie. Butternut squash, Yellow squash, Spaghetti squash, Acorn squash, all other varieties of squash, Green beans, Parsnips, Sweet potato, Snow peas and Carrots. Carrots should only be used as a treat though due to the high amounts of vitamin A. Any food with high amounts of vitamin A should be avoided as reptiles do not absorb a lot of vitamin A. Feeding your Beardie a lot foods such as Carrots will end up in a condition called Vitamin A toxicity which is deadly. Squashes will either have to be cooked or micro-waved before feeding them to your Beardie. This will soften them up and they can then be minced and eaten easier.

Fruits can also be used, just avoid any citrus fruit such as oranges and grape fruit.

Water

Fresh water should be offered daily in a shallow bowl. This water bowl should be disinfected once a week to avoid any bacterial build up. Many Beardie may not drink from a water bowl so you may have to drip the water slowly onto your Beardies snout. Wiggling your finger in the water may also get their attention. Beardies like things that move so creating ripples in the water may get their attention.

Bathing

Bathing your Beardie once a week will help keep them hydrated and will also aid in shedding. Bath water should be warm on your wrist and **not hot**, much like bath water for a small child. Make the water only as deep as your Beardies chest or half way up their front arms. I usually just fill the tub until the water reaches the second knuckle on my index finger for my adults and the first knuckle for the juveniles. **Never** leave your Beardie unattended in the bath, accidents only take a second to happen. It's also a good idea to disinfect your tub when the bath is over because Beardies will often defecate in the water.

Disinfecting

I use a 1/4 cup of bleach mixed with a gallon of water. This is done easiest in an old, clean, milk container. After mixing the bleach and water I then fill a spray bottle with the mixture. This makes it easy to cover the entire surface of what you are cleaning and leaves a container full for when your spray bottle is empty. All surfaces that get feces on them should be disinfected, including water bowls, food bowls and cages. This is how I disinfect all my cages, cage accessories and the tub after bathing.

Spray the entire surface of what you are cleaning until it is soaked. Then let it sit for 15 minutes. After 15 minutes scrub the surface with a rag making sure any old food or feces is removed. Rinse all surfaces repeatedly until you can no longer smell bleach. If you still smell bleach rinse again.

Hygiene

Hand washing is very important when owning **any** reptile. Washing your hands before and after handling your Beardie will help keep you and your new pet healthy. If you wash your hands before handling you reduce the risk of passing anything on to your Dragon. Washing your hands after handling greatly reduce the risk of you contracting salmonella. The risks of getting this are very slim to begin with but hand washing will even further reduce the risks. Your chances of contracting salmonella from the food you eat are greater than your chances of getting it from your Beardie so don't fret.

General

Before deciding on buying a Bearded dragon you should consider a few things. One, do you have a qualified Herp Vet in your area that will be able to care for your new pet if it get's sick? Newly aquired Bearded Dragons should **always** have a fecal sample tested for parasites and a general health checkup. It is also a good idea to have them retested for parasites once a year.

Two, are you going to be able to afford to feed, house and care for this pet during it's life? Bearded Dragons will eat like ravenous beasts when young and will cost you a lot of money. The UV light they require also need to be replaced around every six months, which is also going to cost a bit of money. Let's not forget trips to the Vet, these may also add up over the years of your Beardies life.

This care sheet is made up from what I have learned from years of research and keeping these animals. This does not mean that this is the "Beardie Bible" and the only way to keep and care for them. You are the one that ultimately decides how to properly care for your pet. Please feel free to print and use this care sheet.

You are responsible for the life of your pets. If they are sick get them to a Vet. If they are hungry feed them. Animal abuse is a felony in many states and you should remember that.

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