

Australian Bearded Dragon

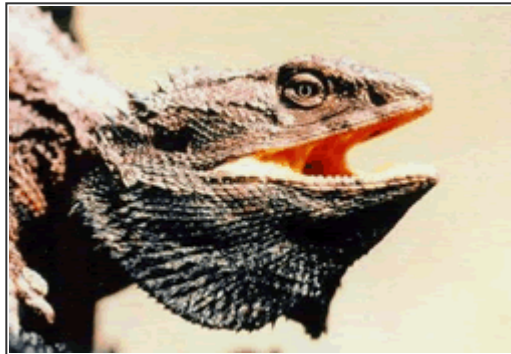


The Australian Bearded Dragon is one of the best lizards to own as a pet. They develop a very docile nature when handled gently and frequently, are usually very good eaters, and are social animals, which often display amusing behaviors.

Many kinds of bearded dragons are available today, the most common being the inland variety, which comes in red or golden phases. In the wild, they can be found in the arid, rocky outback or in the dry woodlands of Australia. Here, they spend much of their time climbing, basking in the sun, and eating just about anything they outsize

If threatened, a dragon will flatten out its usually chubby body, flare its throat (darker in males, thus “bearded”), and display a gaping mouth. This behavior is rarely seen in captivity. The more passive “hand-waving” displayed by more subordinate dragons to dominate ones is much more likely to be witnessed.

Although these lizards are social, males are territorial. If you choose to house them together, house only lizards of similar size together. Otherwise, the smaller may provide a tasty snack for the larger. Females usually establish a hierarchy nicely on their own, but a 50-gallon tank may not even be large enough to prevent a dominant male from stressing or biting its subordinates.



Proper housing for a bearded dragon should include several things. The well-ventilated enclosure should be big enough so that a wide temperature gradient is achieved both horizontally and vertically.

During the day, this gradient should be 86-76 F, with a basking area of 90-100 F near the top of the cage. At night, the cool areas should be no less than 72-75 F. If you should opt for a ceramic heating element, it must be plugged in to a porcelain light socket; these units get so hot that they melt plastic sockets. As a desert species, bearded dragons love to bask. The basking area should provide not only heat, but also full spectrum UVA emitting light, such as that produced by "Vitalite" by Duro-Test. Without these specific rays, at least——hours daily, your lizard will not be able to properly manufacture Vitamin D3 for appropriate bone formation. At night, simple heat or heat and a nocturnal reptile bulb may be used, but no white lights. Substrates should consist only of what is easy to clean and not ingestible. Outdoor carpeting, butcher paper, and paper towels are recommended. Rocks, branches, and plants such as non-prickly succulents, pothos, purslane, and hibiscus are aesthetically pleasing and provide good hiding and basking areas.

Bearded dragons are omnivorous. To provide them with a healthy diet, feed insects that are approximately 1/3 the size of their head. They enjoy crickets, waxworms, and mealworms. Day-old mice, called pinkies, may be offered as well. Vegetation should comprise about 20% of the dragon's diet. They may munch on plants in their cages, but will also benefit from small bits of Chinese cabbages, green beans, broccoli, escarole, mustard and collard greens, carrots, peas, and pumpkin. Fruits, such as raspberries, blueberries, mango and cantaloupe are good choices as well. Some of these foods should be offered in a variety daily, and dusted with a calcium supplement like Rep-Cal every other day. Caution should be used with any multivitamin supplement, as bearded dragons are highly susceptible to vitamin A toxicity. A vitamin dusting on food twice monthly should be adequate, if done at all. Fresh water should be offered in a shallow dish daily, and the lizard should be misted daily, as well. The cage, however, should not be allowed to remain damp.

As with any lizard, new pet exams and annual checkups thereafter are encouraged. Routine bloodwork, physical and fecal exams, and prophylactic deworming are the basics for a healthy animal. If your bearded dragon should become anorexic, lethargic, develop swellings of any kind, or not defecate, consult your veterinarian immediately.
