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BEARDED DRAGON CARE

Bearded dragons belong to the genus *Pogona* (meaning beard), which includes eight species. The most common pet bearded dragon is the **central bearded dragon** (*Pogona vitticeps*) and the pygmy dragon (*Pogona henrylawsoni*). Bearded dragons make great pets; they have a calm and friendly personality, and with appropriate care, they can live a healthy and happy life for ~ 12 years.

Poor care is associated with numerous health problems in dragons, including metabolic bone disease, gastrointestinal disease, constipation, fatty liver, obesity, and gout. Like all reptiles, bearded dragons rely on the complex interaction of their environmental factors, which need to be provided for them to thrive.

Enclosure: The bigger the better

- Enclosure size varies with the size and age of the dragon; a minimum size should be 1.2-1.5m (long) x 0.6m (wide) x 0.6-0.9m (high).
- Enclosure should be constructed of materials that retain heat, is easy to clean, and allow the dragon to observe its surroundings. A window view provides visual stimulation.
- There are many substrate options available, all having pros and cons. Newspaper or paper towels are easy to clean and replace, however don't provide digging opportunities. Fine sand provides opportunities for digging, however, requires regular replacement or sterilisation. Despite popular belief, sand impactions are uncommon and indicate a multifactorial husbandry problem.
- Provide climbing and hiding furniture (branches, rocks, caves) for enrichment, activity, and thermoregulation.
- Outdoor enclosures should be considered if the local climate permits, ensuring both shade and sunshine are available, and the area is predator and escape-proof.
- Disinfect the enclosure once weekly and spot clean as needed.

Sun is for Warmth + UV + Visible light

- Bearded dragons are ectothermic, basking creatures that rely on the sun for metabolism, digestion, and immune function.
- A thermal gradient gives dragons options. The basking spot, provided with a thermostatically controlled **heat globe** should be ~ 38-42°C. The cool end should be ~ 20°C. Monitor with at least 2 **digital thermometers** placed at the level of your dragon.
- UV light provides UVB radiation (290-320nm) required for vitamin D3 production in the skin, which allows calcium absorption from the gut. It also stimulates the production of "feel good" endorphins.
- **UV tubes** are preferred over compact globes, allowing better distribution of UV rays across the dragon's body.
- UV light should be positioned within a distance recommended by the manufacturer from the basking spot (usually ~30cm), and not filtered by glass. Replace the UV light every 6 months or test the UV light with a UV meter.

- No artificial UV light is a replacement for **natural sunshine**. Take your dragon outside in a secure carrier/cage for a minimum of 20-30 minutes of sunshine 2-3 times a week. Make sure shade is available to prevent overheating.
- Recommended light and heat cycle is 12 hours on and 12 hours off in the warmer months. This can be altered in winter, depending on the local climate.

Adult dragons don't need to eat every day

- Wild dragons eat a mixture of plant foods and insects. Juveniles eat ~ 70% insects and ~ 30% plants. Adults eat ~ 30% insects and ~ 70% plants.
- How much to feed?
 - Juveniles: feed a few insects (~5-6, no larger than the width between their eyes) once a day. Offer a mix of veggies/plants the size of the dragon's head once a day.
 - Adults: feed a few insects (~4-5, no larger than the width between their eyes) twice a week. Offer a mix of veggies/plants the size of the dragon's head three times a week.
- **Insects** include crickets, silkworms, woodies, soldier fly larvae. Most insects are naturally low in calcium and require supplementation. Gut-load the insects with a high-quality commercial formula before feeding them out and dust them with calcium carbonate at each feed.
- **Plant foods** include raw vegetables (eg. bok choy, spring mix, endive, rocket, watercress, carrot, broccoli, herbs) and native/wild vegetation and flowers (dandelions, hibiscus, native violet *Eremophilas*, *Hemiandra pungens*, *Crowea*, *Correa*, *Grevillea*). Most plant foods are naturally high in calcium and don't require supplementation. However, omnivore powders and bee pollen granules/powder can be sprinkled on plants to encourage fussy eaters.
- **Supplements**: dust insects with calcium carbonate powder each time, and multivitamin powder every 2 weeks, immediately before feeding them out.
- To minimise malnutrition, a variety of insects and plant foods.
- Mealworms should be offered as **treats only**. **Avoid fruit** as it's associated with dental disease.

Water & Humidity: Sometimes it rains in the desert

- Wild bearded dragons live in dry desert environments, but they still require water access.
- Provide a shallow water dish for drinking.
- Spraying/misting their head encourages drinking and mimics the way they drink water in the wild, which is when it rains.
- In the wild they may seek out **humid microenvironments**. A humid microenvironment can be provided by having a container with a hole cut out as a door and placing moist paper towels inside the container. Replace the paper towels daily. Some dragons enjoy having a soak. Shallow soak (up to dragon's elbow height) your dragon in lukewarm water once a week.

Health care

- Newly acquired dragons should be quarantined and examined by a vet. Annual check-ups are recommended thereafter, particularly if they are used for breeding and before winter.
- Weigh your dragon regularly and record the weight.
- Wash your hands after handling your dragon and between handling different reptiles.