

Captive Husbandry of Australian Bearded Dragons

Basics:

- Bearded dragons can reach lengths of 2 feet in length. Males are typically larger than females.
- Typical lifespan in captivity: 8-10 years
- Sexual maturity is reached between 8-18 months. Sexual activity may begin prior to 12 months of age.

Diet:

- Bearded dragons are omnivores and variety in their diet is important for proper nutrition.
- Vegetable matter offered as a salad should be approximately 50-55% of an adult diet.
 - Dark leafy greens – collard greens, kale, romaine, dandelion greens, turnip greens, mustard greens, beet greens, bok choy, swiss chard, spinach, chicory, escarole
 - Other chopped or grated vegetables can be up to 20% of the diet – squash, zucchini, sweet potato, broccoli, peas, bean sprouts, okra
- Animal matter should be approximately 25% of the adult diet.
 - Appropriate insect size – the length of the insect body should be no greater than the width of the dragon's head
 - Appropriate protein sources – crickets, earthworms, grasshoppers, superworms, wax worms, locusts
 - Avoid lightning bugs and other animals that generate light as they are toxic.
- Fruit should be less than 5% of the diet.
 - Appropriate fruits include – papaya, melon, and banana
- Many dragons will take non-toxic flower blossoms as treats (e.g. hibiscus)

Suggested Feeding Schedule

< 1 month old	feed 2-3 times daily (crickets & vegetable matter)
1-4 months old	feed twice daily (crickets, vegetables, and occasional mealworms)
4 months to adult	feed once daily (crickets, mealworms, salad every day)
adult	feed every 1-2 days (insects/animal protein and vegetables)

Nutritional Supplements

- Mineral/vitamin supplementation is required for a healthy bearded dragon in captivity.
- Lightly dust all food items with a calcium only supplement (**make sure this supplement does not contain phosphorous or vitamin D**).
 - For young dragons, use the calcium supplement with every feeding.
 - For adult dragons, use calcium supplement 1-2 times weekly.

- “Gut load” live insects for at least 24-48 hours prior to feeding them to your dragon.
 - For most insects that can be achieved with calcium rich vegetables such as dark leafy greens. There are also commercial cricket diets available.
- Use a reptile multivitamin once every 2 to 4 weeks. It is important to use a multivitamin that contains preformed vitamin A, **retinol**.

Water/Humidity

- Bearded dragons thrive in low humidity environments, 40 – 60%.
- Dragons may soak in a water dish, and they will commonly defecate while soaking.
- Ensure that fresh, clean drinking water is available at all times in a shallow dish.
- Digital hygrometers are more reliable and inexpensive way to monitor humidity compared to the typical “dial” gauges.

Enclosure/Housing

- Dragons should be housed singly unless in an exceptionally large enclosure. If housed as a group, 1 male to 2-3 females is acceptable with monitoring.
- Adult dragons require a minimum of a 75 gallon or larger enclosure when housed alone.
- Screen tops are recommended for ventilation.
- Be sure to provide hiding places as well as cage furniture that can support the weight of the dragon is climbed on.
- Substrates/flooring should be easily cleaned, non-toxic, and unable to be ingested by the dragon.
 - Avoid sand, gravel, and corncob bedding as they are easily ingested.
- Female dragons should be provided with a “lay bin.”

Heat

- Day time ambient temperature gradient: 80-88°F
- Basking spot: 92-100°F
 - Ensure that the dragon cannot come in contact with the lamp to avoid burns.
- Avoid “hot rocks” as they commonly lead to burns.
- Consider the use of an enclosure thermostat.
- Nighttime ambient temperature gradient: 72-78°F
- A thermometer “gun” is an inexpensive, more reliable, and cost-effective method of monitoring temperatures.

Lighting

- Ultraviolet (UV) light is absolutely essential of normal metabolism.
- Use only the linear, tube fluorescent lamps (**not** compact fluorescent bulbs).
- Use lamps designed for reptiles that emit light in the UVB range (290-320 nanometers).
- UV radiation is filtered out by glass, plexiglass, and plastic. Be sure to use a screen top to avoid this.

- The coating on the UV lamps typically degrades after 6 months, and bulbs should be replaced every 6 months even if they are still producing light.
- Nothing beats real sunlight for UVB radiation. If you take your dragon outside, please be certain to avoid high and low temps, and limit periods in direct sunlight to avoid dehydration. If you take your dragon outside, be sure to use a secure & safe enclosure.

Common Medical Conditions

- Dysecdysis (retained shed)
- Coccidiosis – a protozoan GI parasite. This is incredibly common in young bearded dragons.
- Metabolic bone disease/Nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism
- Egg binding – there are two forms of egg binding, pre- & post- ovulatory follicular stasis. This can occur even if a female bearded dragon that has never been in the presence of a male.
- Obesity – adult dragons that are fed too much animal protein or fruit are commonly overweight. This can lead to difficulty shedding as well as organ dysfunction and mobility issues.

Sources:

LafeberVet (<https://lafeber.com/vet/>)

Mader's Reptile and Amphibian Medicine and Surgery (3rd Edition)

Reptile Medicine and Surgery in Clinical Practice (1st Edition)

Association of Reptile & Amphibian Veterinarians Captive Care Guides