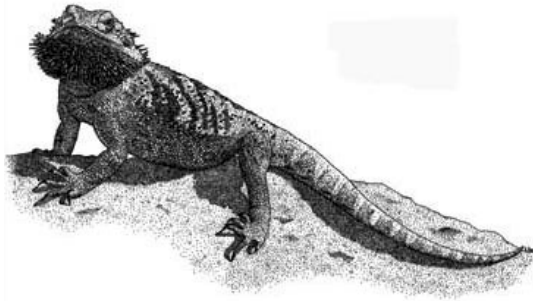


Bearded Dragon

Pogona vitticeps

ANIMAL CARE UNLIMITED

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Omnivorous terrestrial and semi-arboreal lizards native to Australia and New Guinea, where they inhabit open woodlands, and arid scrub and desert habitats. There are seven species described and in Australia they range throughout the country except for the extreme north. One of the more commonly kept reptile species. Most individuals come from captive breeding sources rather than from the wild. A hardy species in captivity and therefore a good choice as a first reptile keeping experience.

Biology- These spiny, heavy-bodied, sun basking reptiles spend a good deal of time perched on vegetation and rocks in search of food. They are more terrestrial than arboreal. Coloration varies with race and environmental background types. During harsh conditions they may rely on abdominal fat reserves for long periods and even may dig into the ground and remain dormant for long periods until more favorable conditions return. Well developed color vision and good senses of taste and smell. Regular health examinations by a qualified veterinarian helps to identify health problems, control parasites and prevent medical problems.

Size and Longevity- Overall lengths of adults range from 18-22 inches and weigh approximately 10-18 ounces. Hatchlings average 4 inches in length and grow rapidly to reach adult size within one year. Their life span may range from eight to twelve years.

Sexual Characteristics- Males generally larger than females. Though shorter, females are stockier than males. Males have broader heads than females. Sexual maturity is reached at 1 to 2 years of age. Males court by rapidly bobbing the head. During mating the male's throat beard visibly darkens. Bearded dragons are difficult to sex when young.

Husbandry/Housing- Bearded dragons require a hot, dry environment to provide the essential conditions for their thermoregulation, digestive and behavioral needs. Their cage humidity must be low. **Space recommendations** for dragons range from a 10 gallon tank for youngsters to a 30-40 gallon tank for an adult; and at least a 55 gallon enclosure for a pair. Dragons need to achieve a body temperature of about 100 degrees F. to properly digest and assimilate their food. A **temperature gradient** in the enclosure will allow them to selectively thermoregulate and should range between the mid-70s or low 80s to 100-115 degrees F at the basking spot. Typical **lighting cycles** are 12-14 hours on and the remainder off. Night temperatures can drop to the sixties as dragons have evolved to accommodate cooler nights. Monitor the environment with an **accurate thermometer** at both extremes of the gradient. One or two limbs should be available for basking. A comfortable basking perch must be provided which is radiated by a basking light. Provide adequate **ventilation**. Proper light and heat sources are essential and ideally including thermostats and timers. **Cage substrates** should not be materials that can be readily ingested, such as sand and small gravel. A proper heating pad under part of the cage bottom provides a partially heated substrate. Give them thermal options. Complex environments make cricket feeding more difficult and offer too many hiding places for them. The fugitive crickets can be a source of annoyance for dragons at night. Newspaper, alfalfa pellets or paper towels can make practical substrates. Use substrates that are non-toxic and easily cleaned or changed. Even "Reptile" or calcium sand can cause blockages. **Water containers** should not be of the type that can tip over.

Sanitation of branches and other furnishings can be done with a dilute bleach solution to prevent excess contamination in the environment. It is essential that the **heat and light** conditions are carefully maintained. Heat primarily from above (heat lamp, light bulb or ceramic heat emitter) rather than from below. Ambient temp: 80-85° F; Basking temp: 100-110 ° F. A heat gradient in cage is ideal. Below substrate heat pads should only cover part of a cage bottom. Take care to prevent bearded dragons from getting burns by getting too close to a heat lamp. We don't recommend "hot rocks". A quality **ultraviolet light source** (such as Zoomed ReptiSun™ or Vita-lite Plus™) is critical to their health because they

cannot manufacture **Vitamin D₃** from their food, and require such light for that process. Fluorescent UVB bulbs should be replaced every six months because they become ineffective in producing the **essential wavelengths of UVB light** after that time in service; metal halide bulbs may last up to one year. Use a screened panel, not glass or plastic between the UV light source and the dragons (it will block the desired UV lightwaves). In warm weather a basking cage placed outdoors can provide exposure to natural sunlight, but be careful the enclosure doesn't overheat. Sunlight through a glass window filters out the necessary UV waves that they require. Be cautious with plants with may be toxic if consumed. Night time heat sources should not be white lights to allow them to sleep.

Feeding- Bearded dragons eat a variety of animal and plant materials, including insects, small animals, fruits, leaves and flowers. Babies are more insectivorous than adults. The commonly fed captive diet includes meal worms, crickets and green vegetables. Vegetable and animal materials are fed in about a 1 to 1 ratio. Feed insect prey proportion to their body size (e.g. small crickets to small dragons). Commercial diets, such as ZuPreem™ provide a balanced dietary calcium/phosphorous ratio and proper protein level. Growing animals are fed more frequently than adults. Feeding regimes vary between hobbyists, but often involves daily feedings of greens and vegetables and every other day feeding of insects.

Insects: Crickets are a principal captive food for dragons. Mealworms, silkworms and waxworms are also popular dietary items. Hazards exist in feeding mealworms, especially to young dragons, since the chitin in the mealworms dermis can cause serious digestive disturbances from impactions. Outside insects may be collected and fed, but lightning bugs and boxelder bugs are toxic and should never be fed to dragons. Crickets should be "gut-loaded" prior to feeding to dragons—this involves feeding the crickets supplements to enhance their nutrient content. Another common practice is power coating crickets with a calcium powder (containing no phosphorous) prior to feeding to improve their mineral balance.

Greens: collard greens, escarole, turnip greens, mustard greens, romaine, dandelion, parsley, kale, carrot tops, bok choy, red cabbage, endive, cilantro. Do not feed spinach since it contains oxalic acid and interferes with the utilization of dietary calcium. Do not feed iceberg lettuce as it has negligible food value and replaces more nutritious foods. Edible grasses, hibiscus, clover, dandelions and rose petals can be fed if free of chemical residues. Safe house plants that may be used in dragon enclosures include *Ficus*, geraniums, hibiscus, petunias, pothos and violets.

Vegetables: shredded green beans and lima beans, shredded flesh of squash, sweet potato, carrot or yam. Other vegetable edibles include bell peppers, cauliflower, corn, kohlrabi, parsnip, peas, cooked potatoes, cooked rice, pumpkin, radishes, rutabaga and snow peas.

Fruit: chopped or mashed fruit, such as apple (no seeds), apricots, blueberries, banana, berries, cantaloupe, figs, grapes, honeydew, kiwi, mangos, papaya, peaches, pears, plums and watermelon (no seeds). Commercial supplement powders are available that can be use to top-dress food and assure extra Vitamin D and calcium carbonate. These supplements should be free of phosphorous and should always be used sparingly. The best strategy is to focus on proper nutrition, environment and lighting for best nutritional health. Regularly recording the weight of your bearded dragon provides valuable health data.

Behavior- Bearded dragons are gentle by nature and if handled carefully rarely bite. Adult males are very aggressive toward each other and should not be housed together. They assume many different sleeping/resting postures and often extend their hind limbs when basking. Young bearded dragons defer to older and more dominant individuals by standing on three legs and waving their other limb in slow circles. This may be repeated with the opposite limb. This behavior persists in adult females in response to aggressive males during the breeding season or while mating. Head bobbing is the usual method of challenging an intruder, as well as flattening out the body and flaring the throat to display the brightly colored lining of the mouth. Combat between two bearded dragons involves a circling behavior in which mouths are open and hissing sounds are made. Tail biting accompanies this combative behavior. Bearded dragons shed periodically and the outer skin layer separates in sheets. Periodic misting may help during this process. Regular soaking in warm water can help to assure adequate hydration (15 min 2X per week). Do not pull on loose skin but let it separate on its own. Pick them up under the belly and hold them securely, but not tightly, with fingers over the back.

Medical Problems: parasites (external and internal), malnutrition causing bone disease, diarrhea, skin problems, gut impactions, respiratory ailments, injuries, ingested foreign bodies, burns, retention of ova (egg binding). Never clean enclosures in human food preparation areas or bathtubs. All reptiles should be considered to be potential reservoirs of organisms which can be transmitted to people, such as Salmonella. Everyone handling or coming into contact with these animals should follow proper sanitation procedures such as hand washing and appropriate handling and disposal of waste, contaminated cage materials and feed dishes. **Common diagnostic procedures** for evaluating ill bearded dragons include comprehensive fecal examinations, blood sampling to evaluate blood cells, blood parasites, and blood chemistry values, and x-ray studies.