

Bearded Dragon Husbandry Guide

This guide is intended to give an overview of key basic requirements for your pet.

If you require more detailed guidance, think your pet is unwell, or would like specific advice, please contact your vet!



Fast Facts!

Some basic facts and needs for your Bearded Dragon.



ENVIRONMENT

Vivarium 4ft Minimum

(This should allow your pet to fully utilise the temperature gradient required)

Lighting - UVB required

(Choose a high output 10 to 12% UVB fluorescent tube, this will need replacing regularly as the UVA/UVB output per bulb decreases over time)

Humidity 30-40%

Temperature gradient

Hot End – 38-42°C

Cool End – 22-26°C

(Hides should be provided for both areas)

BEHAVIOUR

Basking

(Areas must be provided at both temperature ends to allow them to bask)

Solitary

(Should be kept individually)

Inquisitive personalities

(Lots of interaction and enrichment is needed to keep them happy)

Brumation

(Eating less and sleeping more over winter))

Bathing

(Bathing 2-3 times a week in shallow warm water)

HEALTH

Life Span of 10-15 Years

Common Health issues:

- Metabolic Bone Disease, 'MBD'
- Shedding Issues resulting in loss of toes
- Internal and External Parasites

Diet - Live Insects and Vegetables

(Adults need 40% live food and 60% greens)

Supplements

(Live food should be gut loaded and dusted before feeding with an appropriate vitamin and calcium supplement)

Home Sweet Home!

Creating a mini wilderness for your Bearded Dragon!

Bearded dragons originate from dry, hot areas in **Australia**, our weather and climate are not suited to what they need to stay healthy. Therefore, **we must create a 'mini-Australia' for them in our home.** Many of the health conditions seen in pet bearded dragons can be traced back to issues with their husbandry (environment and care).

Most bearded dragons are kept in a vivarium, this must be made from **a secure material** that is **easy to clean** and has **good ventilation**.

The minimum size requirement for an adult bearded dragon would be 4ft long.

This gives plenty of room for a **healthy temperature gradient and room for your pet to stretch out.**

Your pet will need to have this home all to themselves – they can fight and injure each other if kept together.



Substrate

Substrate is the name for the floor covering in your pets' home.

Choosing the right substrate is very important. With healthy adult Bearded Dragons we recommend a **sand/soil (30:70%) mixture**.

Always use **reptile-safe sand** such as clean children's play sand rather than builders' sand which has sharp edges. **Stone tiles with rough surfaces or pieces of natural slate** may be used and can be nice and warm in basking areas and give different surfaces to explore.

However, these non-loose substrates prevent your dragon performing **natural digging behaviours**, so if using slate tiles as the main substrate, also **provide a digging box**.

A product called **'Calci-sand' can be dangerous** because with an incorrect environment, i.e., being too cold which can slow digestion, the sand can clog the digestive tract and cause a blockage. **This condition is called 'impaction'**.

Loose substrates with large pieces such as bark and wood chips, crushed walnut or corn cob granules **are unsafe as they can easily cause impaction if accidentally eaten**, especially by juvenile Bearded Dragons.

It is important to keep the substrate clean to ensure your pets' health. Spot cleaning any waste daily and removing uneaten food is essential.

The home should be cleaned with a **reptile-safe disinfectant** monthly too! Make sure to wash your hands after cleaning and handling as reptiles can carry **Salmonella** which can cause nasty stomach upsets in people.

'Bioactive' substrates can be implemented to use to keep your pet's home clean in a more 'natural' way. **This should be implemented only after research into the method.**

Lighting

Providing the correct lighting is essential for your pet's home.

Reptiles use natural daylight to set their day and night patterns, in the wild they would warm up and bask in the sun.

We aren't quite so lucky with our sunshine here in the UK. **Sunlight contains visible light and 'ultraviolet' (UV) light.** Bearded Dragons can see part of the UV light, called UVA, essential for their colour vision.

Another very important part is called **UVB**, which allows your pet to make essential vitamin D3 in their skin. Vitamin D3 allows your pet to store and use calcium, an essential mineral. **UVB does not pass through glass windows** so placing the home near a window is not enough. Instead, a reptile **UVB lamp must be used inside your pets' home.**

Create a 'photogradient', from light to shade, by positioning your light source close to the basking zone at one end of the vivarium.



Lighting

Providing the correct lighting is essential for your pet's home.



Choose a 10-12% UVB fluorescent tube, at least one half of the vivarium length, and fix it into the roof of the vivarium as far into the hot end as possible.

UVB decreases with distance, so follow the UVB tube manufacturer's recommendations regarding distance between the lamp and your pet. **UVB is partially blocked by mesh, so you may need a stronger UVB bulb in a taller vivarium, or one with a mesh lid.**

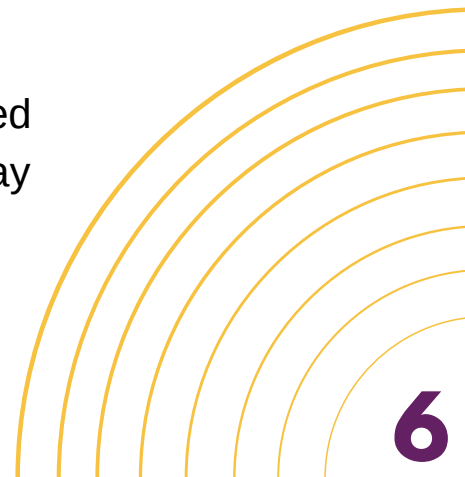
The cool end will then be more shaded, just as in the wild.

Use a reflector of the correct length to direct the light onto your pet. **Follow the UVB tube manufacturer's recommendations** regarding distance between the lamp and your pet.

The UVB output decreases over time so the **UVB output should be checked regularly using an appropriate UV Index (UVI) meter** positioned at the level of the animal directed towards the UV lamp.

The bulb will need changing when the UV produced is no longer high enough. UV lamps must always be guarded to prevent burns, or injuries should the bulb shatter.

Turn off all lights at night. Lamps can be controlled using a simple plug-in timer: 12 hours on during the day and 12 hours off at night.



Heating and Humidity

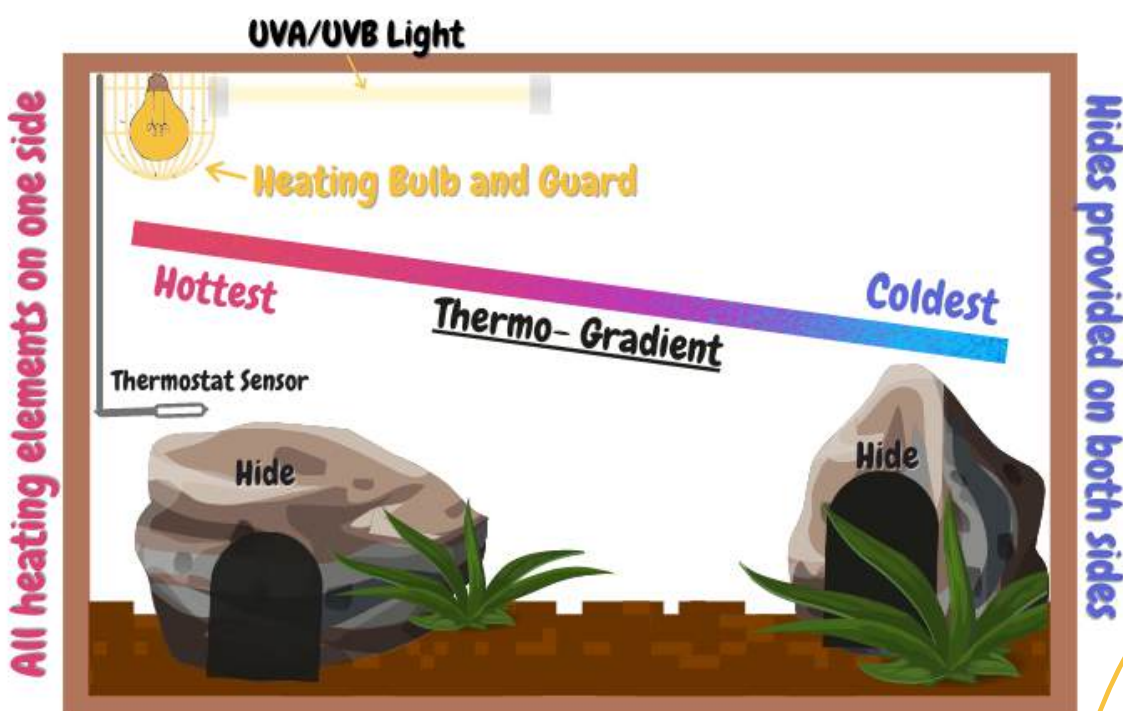
Providing the correct heating and hydration is essential for your pet's home.

Lower humidity is essential to prevent skin or breathing problems. It should be measured in the cool end of your pets' home and should normally be around **30 to 40%**. If it is too high, you will need more ventilation.

Bearded Dragons cannot control their own body temperature like people can. They rely on warming up in the sun in the wild to raise their temperature. We must replicate the heat for them in their home. As above, with the photo-gradient, we must also create a '**thermo-gradient**' for them. This means we must have a **hot end** and a **cool end** for your pet.

This gives your pet a choice of what temperature they would like to be at. **It is important these temperatures are checked every single day.**

A digital 2-in-1 thermometer/hygrometer at each end of the home is the best way to check your pet's home is perfect!



Heating continued

Providing the correct heating and hydration is essential for your pet's home.

Bearded Dragons need a basking zone in their hot end with temperatures of **38-42°C**. Position a 60 to 100 watt heat lamp at the hot end of their home pointing downwards.

Place a natural stone in the basking zone to provide access to the heat, though your Beardie's back should not get closer than 25 to 30 cm from the lamp.

Heat lamps must be guarded to prevent burns.

A thermostat must be used with all heat sources. Place the thermostat probe at the level where the animal will sit. Adjust the thermostat temperature and check the basking zone with a digital thermometer until it reaches **38-42°C**.

The cool end should be between **22-26°C**. Some heat emitting bulbs will also emit visible light, therefore will need to be turned off at night.

A temperature drop at night is natural however, **the temperature should not drop below 20°C at night**. A thermostat and non-light emitting heat source may be needed to **maintain the air temperature whilst keeping their home dark overnight**. To do this a guarded ceramic heater or deep heat projector (DHP) can be used.

*Ideally your pet's home should be set up **at least a week before you bring them home** to ensure everything is running smoothly.*

Feeding

Bearded Dragons are Omnivores!

In captivity Bearded Dragons need to eat **both live invertebrates (live food) and plants and vegetables.**

Safe greens for your Bearded Dragon are:

- Watercress
- Rocket
- Chicory
- Cress
- Grated butternut squash
- Dandelion
- Clover
- Plantain leaves



Safe Live Foods for your Bearded Dragon are:

- Crickets (e.g. brown house crickets),
- 'Calciworms' - As a treat
- Locusts
- Morio worms,
- Dubia cockroaches



Live Food (or Feeder insects) should be kept in **a large, well-ventilated container.** Feeder insects should also be **'gut-loaded' with vitamins and minerals** by offering them an appropriate formulated **gut-loading diet 24-48 hours prior to feeding** them to your Beardie. They should also be offered **safe vegetables to eat.**

If you feed in the vivarium, **feed in the morning** so that the dragon can digest its food during the day and **remove uneaten bugs** to prevent them biting your Bearded Dragon.

Water

Bearded dragons **may not drink from water bowls** often as a lot of their moisture is provided in their diet. However, **a large, shallow dish must be provided at all times** in the cool end of their home with clean, fresh water.

This must be replaced at least daily and as soon as it is soiled.

Feeding By Age

Your pets feeding needs change depending on their age!

Supplements

The captive environment does not supply all of the vitamins and minerals available in the wild, so **supplements are required**.

Along with '**Gut Loading**' their live food, feed should also be **dusted with calcium/nutrient powder 2-3x a week** to ensure they get all the calcium they need in their diet.

It is possible to '**over-supplement**' these, however. If you are worried about your pets calcium level then blood tests can be performed to check the levels.

Feeding for different ages

Baby dragons should be **fed daily up to about 6 months old**, with the greens chopped up small.

Young dragons need **more live food than adults**, so give them about **65% live food, 35% greens**, increasing the amount of greens as they grow.

Juveniles and adults should be fed **every other day/every 2 days**.

Older bearded dragons (larger than 30 cm) need about **40% live food and 60% greens**.

It is a good idea to **weigh your dragon regularly**.



Handling

Handling your pet is a great way to bond!



Never surprise or grab your Bearded Dragon as this can cause stress and lead to a struggle. Your Bearded Dragon should be **gently scooped up with both hands so all four legs are supported**. If your pet backs away from you when you try to pick it up or threatens to bite, it's better to leave them alone and wait for another time.

They should not be taken from their home for so long that their temperature drops. **Around 10 to 15 minutes at a time** is a safe period for this, depending on the air temperature.

Keep other pets separate, regardless of how trustworthy they have been before.

Trips to the vet

If your pet requires a trip to see a vet then it is important to bring them in a **secure container with ventilation**. It is also best to **bring a heat source with you so their temperature does not drop too low**. This can be a covered microwaveable heat disc or hot water bottle to keep temperatures up.



Enrichment

Your pet needs to feel safe in their home.

In the wild Bearded Dragons would **hide from predators under rocks and branches.**

While in captivity they also will enjoy climbing some branches when basking/exploring.

It is important to provide a hide at each end of their home so they can feel safe.

Branches/plants/higher surfaces can also be provided to allow your pet to climb and explore.

If contained safely, such as in a secure pen, your bearded dragon can **be taken outdoors on bright summer days for some natural UV and enrichment.** In this case, ensure that your Beardie also **has access to shade and is supervised constantly.**

Bathing

Your pet can benefit from **bathing 2-3 times a week in shallow warm water** (up to their chest). **5-10 minutes is plenty** and they should be watched at all times. **This can help boost their hydration and aid with shedding.**

Many reptiles seen in the vets are chronically dehydrated; therefore ensuring we boost hydration is essential.

They must be supervised at all times.

Brumation

Some pets will become less interested in food over winter.

In the wild, in the winter when temperatures drop, days become shorter and food becomes scarce, **reptiles will go into 'energy saving mode' (brumation)**.

Many pets will not do this due to artificial lighting and constant temperatures throughout the year in captivity. However, **you may notice your pet eats less and sleeps more over winter**, they should not lose weight though, so it is important to weigh them regularly.

Weight should be monitored weekly to ensure your pet is growing well if young or is not gaining/losing weight if fully grown.

The weight can vary, therefore we use something called body condition scoring (BCS) to assess if your pet is over/underweight. A vet can teach you how to check your pet's BCS to make sure you are able to assess them at home. .



Shedding

Bearded Dragons shed their skin, from their nose to their toes, regularly.

Bearded Dragons **shed their skin in large pieces**. There is no rule as to how often this will happen, but young Dragons will shed skin more frequently.

When ready to shed, **your pet may look dull as the old skin becomes dry**. The skin should then come off easily over a day or so. **Do not pull off old skin if it seems stuck as it can tear the new skin underneath**.

During shedding you Bearded Dragon will spend time in its humid hide, softening the skin. **Then they will normally pull it off gently and eat it**. If patches still remain after a shed, **try bathing them in shallow, tepid water for about five minutes to soften it**.

Poor shedding on the feet can cut off the blood supply and lead to the loss of toes. However, if your pet is well hydrated this should not be an issue. **Most shedding issues can be corrected with adjustments in hydration and humidity**.



MBD and Eggs

Metabolic Bone Disease can be very common in incorrectly housed pets.



One of the most common problems for captive reptiles is **metabolic bone disease, 'MBD'**, a term used to describe a range of nutritional diseases. However, it is most often **due to a lack of UVB lighting, resulting in vitamin D3 deficiency**. This prevents your pet absorbing calcium from food, causing muscle weakness and softening of the bones.

Symptoms include muscle twitching, swollen legs, fragile bones and eventually, permanently deformed limbs, jaws, the spine or tail. **This is why it is so important to ensure your pet's home and diet are perfect.**

Females and Eggs

It is quite common for **female dragons to develop eggs** even if they have never been with a male.

This is not a problem if she is **offered a digging box in which to lay her eggs but without this she may become 'egg bound'**, a serious condition.

Remove any eggs you find and freeze them before disposal if there is a possibility they are fertile. In some cases a female may start laying eggs very frequently.

This can place a dangerous load upon her calcium and energy reserves, so she will need careful supplement use.

Please contact your vet if you are worried about your pet in this way.

Health Checks

It is important to check your pet daily for signs of illness, common things to check are:

Skin

Ensure all sheds has come away fully whilst shedding and that there are no wounds or damaged areas.

Vent/Cloaca

Check the vent is clean and dry and there is nothing abnormal protruding from it. Their droppings are made up from faecal waste (the dark part) and urates (the white part); there may also be a small amount of clear liquid when well hydrated. It is a good idea to have regular faecal samples tested to assess for parasite burden.

Eyes

Ensure are clean and bright and open with no discharge

Mouth

No signs of sores, scabs or discharge

Strength

Check your pet is able to support themselves and grip well and their limbs and spine are nice and straight.



Further Information

Always ensure you buy your pet from a reputable breeder.

Sources

2019. Bearded Dragon Care Sheet. [ebook] Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, pp.1-4. Available at: [Accessed 6 May 2021].

Girling, S. and Raiti, P., 2004. BSAVA manual of reptiles. 2nd ed. British Small Animal Veterinary Association.

If you have any concerns do not hesitate to contact your vet.

