

Bearded Dragons

Nutrition

One of the most common problems encountered when raising lizards involves improper nutrition. Variety in the diet, and using the proper dietary supplements remain the keys to keeping your pet healthy and maintaining healthy growth.

When bearded dragons are juveniles, they mainly eat small insects such as crickets, fruit flies and mealworms. When feeding these insects in captivity it is important that the insects are raised with a high calcium food so that the lizards get the proper calcium that they require. Most people with lizards try to keep a small colony of crickets and/or mealworms for flexibility of feeding. Alternatively many pet stores will sell these insects directly to you (at a high mark-up). Most pet stores also offer cans of killed insects for feeding, but lizards rely on their tracking skills to feed, so live insects are preferred. If you must feed them killed insects, you can purchase a vibrating food dish that shakes the insects around, to activate those tracking skills.

When dragons get closer to full size, they eat a lot more vegetables. Adult bearded dragons eat about 50% Insects and 50% vegetables. As with Green Iguanas, the veggies these guys eat should be high in calcium. Below is a list of some food items and their relative calcium contents.

Good foods (high calcium):

Collard Greens, bok choy (A Chinese vegetable), turnip greens, mustard greens, kale broccoli leaves (not the tops), dandelion greens, fig leaves, mulberry leaves, and the flowers from Hibiscus, Eugenia & Nasturtiums

Foods to supplement primary sources above:

Yellow squash, pasta, string beans, bean sprouts, tofu, figs, egg whites

Avoid like the plague:

Lettuce, spinach, celery, cucumbers and fruit

We have a pelleted food here that is high in calcium and the other nutrients needed to help Bearded Dragons grow. Over time (sometimes weeks or months) Dragons will start to eat this food. While you could feed just the pelleted food exclusively most people feed their dragons a mix of veggies, insects and pellets.

Temperature:

Bearded Dragons require a temperature of 90 - 103 degrees in their enclosures during the daytime, and a temperature in the low 80's at night. Because of this, they will need an external heat source and a glass or plastic cover to their enclosure. Be careful with a wire mesh top because often the heat loss is too much for these desert lizards.

The safest source of heat comes from a source outside the cage. Placing a heating pad underneath the cage provides for a good



heat source. Elevate the cage ¼ inch above the pad for maximum safety. An overhead light, illuminating ½ the cage space is good too. Lizards like to get their heat sources from basking, so this provides the closest environment to their natural habitat.

Hot rocks and sizzle stones are electronically heated elements that are designed for use in the cage. Avoid these, the cord can be frayed and bitten with time resulting in electric shock. With larger dragons, the stone will not heat their entire body, and while they are waiting for that part of their body to heat up, they can suffer very severe burns.

Humidity:

Reptiles also need high humidity to maintain proper health. The plants in the cage (whether plastic or real) and the lizards should be heavily misted with water 4-6 times daily. This also provides a water source for the dragon. A ceramic bowl should be filled with water and placed in the cage as well. Dragons will use this as a bath, so change the water daily.

Ultraviolet Light Source:

Like all animals, iguanas need an ultraviolet light source to synthesize Vitamin D, which is crucial for proper calcium metabolism. Sunlight filtered through windows or cage glass is insufficient, because glass and most plastics filter UV rays out. During the summer, a few hours in direct sun will help, but you will also need an interior source for fall, spring & winter. Either an incandescent artificial UV light source or a blacklight will do. We sell lights here that provide a good source of UVA.

Incandescent UVA

> 5 Feet from Cage
on 10 -12 hours daily
replace every 6 - 7 months

Blacklight

< 18 Inches from Cage
on 8 hours daily
replace every 6 - 12 months

Bearded dragons also require a source of UVB rays. Most plant growth bulbs do NOT provide adequate UVB rays for Bearded Dragons to grow properly. The lights that provide these additional ultraviolet rays are usually fluorescent. But they now make bulbs that use fluorescent technology and screw into an incandescent socket. We carry those here at Swan Corner. A UVB source of 5.0 or above is required for bearded dragons, and those lights should be located 12-18 inches away from the bottom of the tank.

Housing:

It is important to have a cage which is hygienic and is easy to clean. Most bacterial & fungal infections can be directly traced to stool contamination and a damp, must environment. The cage bottom should be covered with newspaper or butcher paper +/- indoor outdoor carpeting. Several pieces of carpeting should be used so one is drying while the other is in use. Avoid corncobs, wood shavings, kitty litter, fine gravel, sand or sawdust. This material is easily contaminated, and can be ingested causing life-threatening obstructions. Avoid moss or naturally growing grass, as their high moisture content can be a problem. Once any urine or fecal matter contaminates the enclosure, it should be cleaned. Avoid using pine scented cleaners and Lysol. They can be



toxic. We sell quaternary ammonium compounds called "Wipe Out" for easy cage cleaning. These cleaners are highly effective and completely non-toxic.

If you wish to use calcium sand or some natural bedding, setting up a small area in the cage is preferred. Think of it as the lizard's litter pan. This way you won't be using a ton of material (which can be expensive) and it will be easy to clean weekly.

A firmly attached branch or non-resinous hardwood (oak, birch, apple, pear, or cherry) should be placed in the cage. Make sure the diameter of the branch allows for easy grasping. Driftwood, grapevines or ropes can enrich the environment. Silk, artificial plants are easy to keep clean, and, unlike plastic plants, are not a potential source of obstructions. Real plants are fine, but make sure they aren't toxic.

An area should be set up as a hiding place. Reptiles feel more comfortable if they feel secure. Some will not eat if denied a place to hide.

One Dragon per cage is best. They are very territorial and may fight.

Salmonella:

Salmonella is commonly associated with food poisoning in people but is a normal organism found in the digestive tract of most reptiles. Because of that, after handling any reptile, it is best to wash your hands. Also, ban him from your kitchen for safety's sake. Any lizard crawling around on your countertops is dangerous to you and to him.

Keeping your lizard environment as clean as is possible will prevent the proliferation of these bacteria in the cage, and will keep both you and your pet healthier.