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Bearded Dragon Lizards

This is going to be a very brief introduction to arguably the best reptile pet in the hobby, the bearded dragon, *Pogona vitticeps*. I would recommend the Bearded Dragon Manual, by Phillippe de Vosjoli to anyone considering this species, as there is more bad information on the Internet regarding beardies than most reptiles... and that's really saying something!

Picking Your Dragon

Babies are cute, but fragile and high maintenance. I personally feed babies five times daily. If kept in groups, a hungry baby dragon may eat the tail tips and fingers of its cage mates, so be prepared to throw food at them all day long or house singly! Larger dragons are much more sturdy, and a better choice for a first pet for most people. Males have more personality and blacken their beards more than females, but both make fine pets. Females are usually more laid back and seldom go through the "attitude" stage that most young males seem to have. If you are going to house older dragons together, it is imperative to have only one male per cage. Like most lizards, males will fight viciously.

Housing

40 Gallon "breeder" aquariums are probably the most popular cage choice, but anything at least 3 feet long and 18 inches wide will suffice for one adult. Dragons are from hot dry inland Australia and love a BRIGHT tank. I cannot emphasize this enough! Besides the UVB they get from proper bulbs, and warm temperatures that keep them alive, brightness keeps these lizards psychologically healthy. A dragon in a dim tank is almost always listless and in declining health. They can have hot spots in their tank very hot; I regularly have babies with a hot zone reaching 130 degrees. The important thing is that they can get out of this heat when they need. Many a dragon has cooked in a small enclosure where they could not escape the heat, don't let that happen to yours. The cool end should never get below 70 degrees. There are many substrates that work well with beardies, and many arguments on Internet message boards about them all. Yesterday's News cat litter is my favorite. I also provide a climbing area to get near the lamp to bask. This can be stone, wood, or about anything they can easily climb.

Feeding and Water

Baby beardies eat mostly insects, but some greens are essential for nutrients. As they grow, they should eat much more vegetable matter. I try to get adults on 80% vegetation and 20% bugs. Crickets and mealworms are the most commonly available insects and vegetation can contain mustard greens and the like with some squash, zucchini, apple, pear, and occasionally a bit of strawberries or cherries (minus the pit). Adding a splash of color to the greens will often encourage them to eat salads better. Avoid most lettuces, as they are lacking in nutrients, particularly iceberg. I have yet to have a bearded dragon that would drink standing water. You can mist or soak them weekly to hydrate them, but they should get ample water from their daily serving of fresh vegetables.

Please understand I have barely scratched the surface of properly caring for these fascinating reptiles. I may make a more in-depth care sheet in the future, but to cover everything it will be many pages. Feel free to stop by or call the shop with any questions you might have if you are considering one of these personable saurians!

- Chip Bridges