

Bearded Dragon

Care Guide for New Owners

Bearded Dragon

Reptile

Intermediate Level

UVB Required

Quick Facts at a Glance

Species	Pogona vitticeps (Central bearded dragon)
Lifespan	10 to 15 years with proper care
Adult Size	18 to 24 inches nose to tail tip; 300 to 600 grams
Activity Cycle	Diurnal; active during the day
Temperament	Highly social and tolerant; one of the most handleable lizards available
Enclosure Size	Adult: minimum 4x2x2 ft; 120 gallon or equivalent
Basking Temp	100 to 110 degrees F basking surface
Cool Side Temp	80 to 85 degrees F ambient
UVB	High-output UVB is non-negotiable; Ferguson Zone 3 to 4
Humidity	30 to 40 percent; bearded dragons prefer dry conditions
Diet	Omnivore; insects plus leafy greens; ratios change with age
Legal Status	Legal in Wisconsin; verify local ordinances

Meet the Bearded Dragon

Bearded dragons are one of the most popular pet lizards in the world, and they have a reputation for good reason. They are alert, curious, and remarkably tolerant of human interaction. A well-socialized bearded dragon will sit on your shoulder, watch television with you, and respond visibly when you approach their enclosure. They communicate in fascinating ways through body language, color changes, and arm waving, and observing them closely is one of the genuine joys of bearded dragon

ownership.

They are, however, a real commitment with specific and non-negotiable care requirements. The two most critical are proper UVB lighting and appropriate temperatures. Without correct UVB, a bearded dragon develops metabolic bone disease, a progressive and painful condition that is entirely preventable with the right setup. Getting the lighting right from day one is the single most important thing you can do for a bearded dragon's long-term health.

Captive Breeding and Responsible Ownership

Almost all bearded dragons in the pet trade today are captive-bred, many of them many generations removed from wild-caught stock. Wild central bearded dragons in Australia are protected and export is prohibited. The captive population we have today exists because of decades of breeding programs. Owning one responsibly means providing the conditions that allow them to thrive, not just survive, and committing to their long-term wellbeing.

Where They Come From

Central bearded dragons (*Pogona vitticeps*) are native to the arid and semi-arid regions of central and eastern Australia, including scrublands, open woodlands, and desert edges. They are diurnal, spending their days basking in intense sunlight on rocks, fence posts, and fallen logs, thermoregulating carefully to reach optimal body temperature for digestion and activity.

Their natural environment features very high UV radiation, very high basking temperatures, low humidity, and a dramatic temperature drop at night. Understanding this environment is the key to understanding why their care requirements are what they are. High UVB exposure is not a luxury for a bearded dragon, it is a biological necessity. Their bodies produce Vitamin D3 from UVB radiation, and without it, they cannot absorb calcium from their food.

Legal Considerations

Bearded dragons are legal to own in Wisconsin. They are not listed as a restricted or prohibited species at the state level. As always, verify whether your city or county has any local exotic animal ordinances that may apply. Check your lease if you rent. Bearded dragons are among the least legally contentious reptiles, but local rules always take precedence.

Enclosures and Housing

Bearded dragons need large enclosures with excellent ventilation, a proper thermal gradient, and intense overhead lighting. They are active lizards who use their space. A cramped or poorly lit enclosure produces a stressed, unhealthy animal.

Enclosure Size

Juveniles can be started in a 40-gallon enclosure but will quickly need more space. Adults need a minimum of 120 gallons, or approximately 4 feet long by 2 feet wide by 2 feet tall. Larger is always better. Many experienced keepers use 6x2x2 or 8x2x2 foot enclosures for adults. Bearded dragons are active and will use extra floor space.

Enclosure Type

Screen or mesh-topped glass terrariums allow the overhead UVB and heat lighting setup that bearded dragons require and provide the ventilation they need for low humidity. Front-opening glass terrariums are popular and widely available. PVC enclosures work well if vented appropriately and if the lighting can be mounted inside rather than on top. Adequate ventilation is important for keeping humidity low and preventing respiratory issues.

UVB Lighting: The Most Important Thing

Bearded dragons require intense, high-quality UVB light to synthesize Vitamin D3, which is essential for calcium absorption. Without adequate UVB, no amount of dietary calcium supplementation fully compensates, and the dragon will eventually develop metabolic bone disease. This is not a risk you manage. It is a requirement you meet.

What Is Ferguson Zone 3 to 4?

The Ferguson Zone system categorizes reptiles by their natural UV exposure in the wild. Bearded dragons fall in Zone 3 to 4, meaning they naturally receive very high UVB exposure during their active periods. This means you need a high-output UVB bulb, not the low-output bulbs designed for forest species.

Recommended UVB bulbs for bearded dragons include the Arcadia T5 HO 12 percent and the Zoo Med T5 HO Reptisun 10.0. Compact or coil UVB bulbs are not adequate for bearded dragons regardless of their stated output. Linear T5 HO bulbs are the standard. The bulb should run the length of the enclosure and be mounted inside the enclosure or very close to a mesh top, as mesh and glass filter a significant portion of UV radiation.

UVB Bulb Lifespan

UVB output degrades over time even when the bulb still appears to produce visible light. Replace your UVB bulb every 6 months for T5 HO bulbs, even if it still looks lit. An expired UVB bulb that appears functional but produces no meaningful UV is one of the most common and most dangerous mistakes in bearded dragon care.

Photoperiod

Bearded dragons need 12 to 14 hours of light per day in summer and can be reduced to 10 to 12 hours in winter to mimic natural seasonal cycles. All lighting should go off at night to allow a proper rest period. Night temperatures can drop to 65 to 70 degrees F without a problem for a healthy adult dragon.

Temperature and Basking

Bearded dragons require a very high basking temperature that allows them to reach optimal body temperature for digestion and immune function. Without an adequately hot basking spot, a bearded dragon cannot digest its food properly, which leads to impaction, malnutrition, and immune suppression.

Target Temperatures

Basking surface temperature: 100 to 110 degrees F. Measure with a temperature gun directly on the basking surface.

Warm side ambient air: 85 to 95 degrees F.

Cool side ambient air: 80 to 85 degrees F.

Nighttime low: Can drop to 65 to 70 degrees F for healthy adults. Juveniles should stay above 70 degrees F.

A halogen flood bulb (50 to 100 watts depending on enclosure size and distance) is the most recommended basking heat source. Halogen bulbs produce infrared radiation similar to sunlight, which warms the dragon more deeply and naturally than other bulb types. Avoid ceramic heat emitters as a primary daytime heat source since bearded dragons are visual baskers who need to see the heat source. Always use a thermostat or a dimmer to regulate output and prevent overheating.

Humidity

Bearded dragons come from arid environments and require low humidity, between 30 and 40 percent. High humidity causes respiratory infections and skin problems. Ensure the enclosure has good ventilation and use a dry substrate. Avoid misting the enclosure. Fresh water should be provided in a shallow dish, and many dragons enjoy a weekly 15-minute warm bath, which supports hydration and helps with shedding.

Substrate

Safe Choices

- Tile (ceramic or slate): Easy to clean, retains heat, wears down nails naturally
- Reptile carpet: Acceptable but harbors bacteria; replace frequently
- Bioactive desert mix (organic soil, play sand blend) for larger setups
- Paper towels or newspaper for hatchlings and juveniles

Avoid These

- Loose particle substrates (calcium sand, vita sand, play sand alone): High impaction risk, especially for juveniles
- Cedar or pine: Toxic to reptiles
- Walnut shell substrate: Causes impaction
- Gravel: Sharp edges cause foot injuries

Impaction Risk

Loose particle substrates are a significant impaction risk, especially for juvenile dragons who are more likely to accidentally ingest substrate while hunting insects. Tile or paper towels are strongly recommended for juveniles. Adults on bioactive setups require careful monitoring.

Diet and Nutrition

Bearded dragon diet changes significantly with age. Juveniles need a diet that is heavily weighted toward insects for growth. Adults shift to a diet that is primarily leafy greens with a smaller insect component. Getting this balance right at each life stage is important for preventing obesity in adults and malnutrition in juveniles.

Juvenile Diet (Under 12 Months)

Juveniles should eat approximately 70 percent insects and 30 percent leafy greens by volume. They need to be fed insects 2 to 3 times per day, offering as many insects as they will eat in a 10-minute window. This high-protein diet fuels their rapid growth. Dubia roaches and crickets are the most recommended feeder insects. Mealworms and superworms are too high in fat and chitin for regular feeding in juveniles.

Adult Diet (Over 18 Months)

Adults shift to approximately 70 to 80 percent leafy greens and 20 to 30 percent insects. Feeding insects once or twice a week is adequate for most healthy adults. Overfeeding insects to adult dragons leads to obesity, gout, and organ stress. Fresh leafy greens should be available daily.

Safe Foods

- Collard greens, mustard greens, turnip greens
- Dandelion greens and flowers
- Endive, escarole, arugula
- Butternut squash, acorn squash
- Dubia roaches, crickets, black soldier fly larvae
- Hornworms (high water content, good for hydration)

Avoid These

- Spinach (binds calcium, use sparingly)
- Iceberg lettuce (no nutritional value)
- Avocado (toxic)
- Onions, garlic (toxic)
- Fireflies or wild-caught insects (toxic or pesticide risk)
- Citrus fruits
- Mealworms as a staple (too high in fat)

Calcium and Vitamin Supplementation

Calcium supplementation is essential for bearded dragons. Dust feeder insects with calcium powder without Vitamin D3 at most feedings (D3 from supplements can accumulate to toxic levels; let UVB lighting provide D3 naturally). Use a multivitamin supplement once or twice a week. Phosphorus-free calcium carbonate powder is the standard supplementation product.

Handling and Interaction

Bearded dragons are genuinely one of the most handleable reptiles available. Many individuals become very comfortable with regular interaction and show clear recognition of their owners. Give a new dragon two weeks to settle before handling begins. Start with short sessions and build up gradually. Support the full body, including the tail, at all times.

Bearded dragons communicate through body language that is fascinating to learn. Black beard display indicates stress, aggression, or temperature seeking. Head bobbing in males signals dominance or courtship. Arm waving is a submissive or recognition gesture. Flattening the body is a thermoregulation response to maximize surface area for heat absorption. A dragon that consistently shows a black beard during handling is stressed and needs slower, more patient socialization.

Shedding

Bearded dragons shed in patches rather than in one complete piece the way snakes do. Juveniles shed more frequently than adults. Signs of an approaching shed include dull or faded coloration, flaky-looking skin, and sometimes reduced appetite. A weekly warm bath during this period helps soften the skin and supports clean shedding. Never pull at retained shed. If pieces remain around the toes or tail tip, soak in warm water and contact a vet if pieces do not come free, as constriction can cause tissue loss.

Brumation

Brumation is a winter dormancy period similar to hibernation that bearded dragons may undergo in response to shorter days and cooler temperatures. Signs include reduced activity, prolonged sleeping, reduced appetite, and lethargy. It can begin any time between October and February and last anywhere from a few weeks to several months. Brumation is normal and healthy for adult dragons. Juveniles under one year should not be allowed to brumate. Ensure the dragon has had a recent bowel movement before brumation to prevent food rotting in the gut. Offer water regularly even during brumation.

Common Health Issues

Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD)

The most common serious illness in captive bearded dragons and entirely preventable. Caused by inadequate UVB, insufficient calcium supplementation, or both. Signs include soft or rubbery jaw bones, limb tremors, bowing of the legs, difficulty walking, pathological fractures, and lethargy. Early cases are treatable with corrected husbandry and veterinary calcium supplementation. Advanced cases can be permanent. Correct UVB from day one prevents MBD entirely.

Impaction

A digestive blockage caused by ingestion of substrate, an insect that is too large, or insufficient hydration. Signs include straining to defecate, a swollen abdomen, lethargy, and loss of appetite. Requires veterinary treatment. Prevent by using safe substrate, feeding appropriately sized insects, and ensuring adequate hydration through baths and water availability.

Atadenovirus (ADV / Wasting Disease)

A highly contagious and currently incurable viral disease. Signs include neurological symptoms, failure to thrive, chronic digestive issues, and progressive wasting despite eating. Dragons can be carriers without showing symptoms. Test new animals before introducing to a collection with other reptiles.

Respiratory Infections

Often caused by humidity that is too high, drafts, or temperatures that are too low. Signs include open-mouth breathing, wheezing, mucus around the nostrils, and lethargy. Requires veterinary treatment.

Yellow Fungus Disease (Chrysosporium Anamorph of Nannizziopsis vriesii, CANV)

A severe, often fatal fungal infection. Signs include yellow or brown discolored patches on the scales that spread, tissue necrosis, and rapid deterioration. Any rapidly spreading scale discoloration warrants immediate veterinary attention. No reliable cure exists for advanced cases.

Parasites (Coccidia and Pinworms)

Common in bearded dragons, particularly those recently acquired. Signs include loose or bloody stools, weight loss, and lethargy. A fecal exam by an exotic vet can diagnose and guide treatment.

Gout

A metabolic condition caused by uric acid buildup in the joints and organs, often linked to excessive protein intake in adults or chronic dehydration. Signs include swollen joints, lethargy, and difficulty moving. Requires veterinary management and dietary correction.

Things Every New Bearded Dragon Owner Should Know

UVB is not optional.

Inadequate UVB is the leading cause of metabolic bone disease in pet bearded dragons. Buy a quality T5 HO UVB bulb, mount it correctly, and replace it every 6 months. This single piece of equipment has more impact on your dragon's long-term health than almost anything else.

Diet ratios change as they grow.

A juvenile on an adult diet will be malnourished. An adult on a juvenile diet will become obese. Know where your dragon is in its development and feed accordingly.

Replace the UVB bulb even when it still looks lit.

UV output degrades before the bulb burns out. A bulb that looks fine may be producing no useful UV. Set a calendar reminder every 6 months.

Brumation can look alarming if you are not expecting it.

A dragon that suddenly sleeps for weeks and refuses food in autumn or winter may simply be entering brumation. Rule out illness with a vet visit if you are unsure, but do not panic.

Baths support hydration and shedding.

A 15-minute warm bath once or twice a week helps maintain hydration and softens shed skin. Many dragons also defecate during baths, which keeps the enclosure cleaner.

Find a reptile-experienced exotic vet before you need one.

Bearded dragon health issues can develop quickly. Identify a vet in your area before an emergency occurs.

This is a 10 to 15 year commitment.

Plan accordingly. A bearded dragon adopted today may be with you through major life transitions. Make sure your lifestyle can accommodate that.

Questions? We're Here!

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions and support you throughout your bearded dragon ownership journey. Reach us at boggysbuddies@gmail.com or find us on Facebook and Instagram.