Bearded Dragon Care Guide

Pogona vitticeps

Provide enough room to move freely between broad overhead warmth, effective UVB and cool shade. A varied plant-rich adult diet and measured portions help prevent the obesity associated with unrestricted insect feeding.

Species Profile

Common name: Bearded Dragon

Scientific name: *Pogona vitticeps*

Adult size: 18-24 in (46-61 cm) total length

Average lifespan: 10-15 years

Native range: Central and eastern inland Australia

Habitat and activity: Diurnal; semi-arid woodland, scrub and open basking sites

Diet: Leafy greens and vegetables plus varied insects; proportions change with age

Care difficulty: Intermediate

Shopping List

- Secure enclosure at least 48 × 24 × 24 in (122 × 61 × 61 cm; L × W × H) for one adult; see Housing for exceptions and group arrangements.
- Digital thermometers for different zones; a suitable hygrometer; timer for a consistent day/night cycle.
- Species-appropriate substrate and multiple stable hides or covered retreats.
- Reliable supply of the staple foods described below, clean feeding tools and a transport container.
- Appropriate overhead heat source if required, controlled by a compatible thermostat; infrared thermometer for surfaces.
- Appropriate visible lighting and, where recommended below, a linear UVB fixture with measured shade and exposure zones.
- Fresh-water dish or cup; insect supplements when applicable; a scale appropriate to the animal's size.

Housing

Our recommended starting adult enclosure is 48 × 24 × 24 in (122 × 61 × 61 cm; L × W × H) for one animal. Larger usable space is encouraged. These dimensions are a husbandry recommendation, not a species-specific experimentally proven threshold.

Provide multiple hides across the warm-to-cool and moist-to-drier gradient, covered travel routes and species-appropriate burrowing or low climbing structure. Fix heavy decor to the floor before adding loose substrate so digging cannot undermine it.

Juveniles may use a furnished adult enclosure when food intake, hydration and waste can be monitored. A temporary grow-out enclosure should still offer choice and cover. Quarantine newcomers separately with dedicated tools and a substrate that permits health monitoring; arrange veterinary assessment for unknown-origin animals.

Lighting & UVB

Provide roughly 10-12 hours of visible daylight followed by darkness. A measured UV Index (UVI) around 3.0-5.0 at the most exposed usable site, declining to near zero inside retreats, is our conservative starting recommendation. UVB and bright daytime illumination are recommended for routine care. These working UVI targets are not a claim that a controlled dose trial exists for every species.

Measure exposure at the animal's back height with an appropriate UVI meter, such as a Solarmeter 6.5. Lamp percentage, wattage and a fixed distance alone do not establish exposure: reflectors, mesh, perch height, plant growth and lamp age change output. Keep glass/plastic out of the UV path, follow fixture safety instructions and provide complete shade. Replace or reassess lamps according to measured output and manufacturer guidance.

Heating & Temperature

- Localized basking surface: 100-110°F (38-43°C).
- Cool-zone air: 75-82°F (24-28°C).
- Nighttime air: 65-75°F (18-24°C) for healthy established animals.

Create the gradient on one side rather than heating every hide to the same temperature. Use a compatible thermostat on each heat source; a manual lamp dimmer does not replace thermostatic protection. Secure the probe and verify temperatures independently: probe thermometers measure air/retreat temperature, while an infrared thermometer measures exposed surfaces.

Use appropriately guarded overhead warmth when needed. Keep animals clear of hot fixtures, avoid heat rocks, and switch visible lights off at night. Night heat is needed only when the room falls below the appropriate range; use a thermostat-controlled lightless source if necessary.

Humidity & Ventilation

30-50% ambient with good ventilation. Treat readings as a starting pattern rather than a number to chase regardless of substrate, airflow or animal behavior.

Measure humidity in a representative occupied zone, away from a freshly sprayed surface. Provide sheltered moisture choices while retaining airflow. Persistent condensation, sour odor, flooded soil or surfaces that never dry indicate a setup problem. Ventilation and hydration must be adjusted together rather than simply sealing all vents.

Water & Hydration

Provide a clean, appropriately shallow dish or accessible elevated water cup at all times. Change it daily and immediately when soiled; wash it regularly with dedicated tools. Potable water is generally suitable, with treatment where local water quality requires it.

For animals that drink droplets, mist foliage or suitable surfaces at the time they become active, then allow partial drying. Droplets supplement the dish; water chemistry claims should be based on evidence rather than a species' trade name.

Substrate

Healthy adult bearded dragons do well on a safe naturalistic substrate that allows digging and normal movement. A good DIY desert substrate is 50% clean play sand, 30% organic topsoil, and 20% excavator clay, packed at least 4" deep when possible.

Clean play sand, sandy soil mixes, slate tile, or textured stone can also be used. Sick, wounded, or very young dragons should be kept on paper towels or another simple, cleanable surface until they are stable and eating well.

Avoid calcium sand, crushed walnut shell, corn cob, bark chips, and other loose substrates with large or sharp pieces. These can increase impaction or injury risk, especially when temperatures and hydration are not correct.

Feces and urates should be removed daily, and contaminated substrate should be scooped out and replaced. Full substrate replacement depends on the setup, but non-bioactive substrate should generally be replaced every 3-6 months or sooner if soiled.

Food & Feeding

Offer a varied rotation of leafy greens and vegetables such as collard, mustard, turnip and dandelion greens, endive, escarole and squash. Adults should receive plant food daily, with appropriately sized, gut-loaded insects as a smaller component. Avoid routine fruit, fatty treats and wild-caught prey.

Growing juveniles require more insect nutrition than adults, but repeated unlimited feeding promotes excessive growth and obesity. Start with a measured small insect meal daily for young animals, gradually reduce frequency as growth slows, and provide fresh greens daily. Established adults commonly receive small insect meals about twice weekly, adjusted to body condition and activity.

Use varied cultured roaches, crickets, locusts where permitted, silkworms and black soldier fly larvae. Monitor weight and the shape of the body and tail base; change portions rather than maintaining an all-you-can-eat schedule. Remove biting prey after feeding.

Supplements

Lightly dust appropriate insect meals with calcium and use a balanced reptile multivitamin containing suitable vitamin A according to the product’s directions. Gut-loading and variety support nutrition but do not eliminate the need to balance calcium-poor prey.

Match D3 supplementation to the actual UVB exposure and to vitamins already included in other products. UVB does not automatically mean zero dietary D3, and lack of UVB does not justify unlimited D3. Follow one coherent program; do not combine multiple strong vitamin products or coat every feeder heavily.

Decor & Enrichment

Decorations play a vital role in your bearded dragon's enclosure as environmental enrichment. Enrichment items encourage exercise, climbing, basking, digging, hiding, hunting, and other natural behaviors.

Good decor can include large cork logs, sturdy branches, slate, rocks, dig boxes, textured backgrounds, artificial plants, live edible plants, and large hides. The setup should not be bare; a bearded dragon should have choices.

Handling & Behavior

Let the animal settle and feed consistently before brief optional handling. Support the body, work low over a safe surface and stop when repeated retreat, escape attempts or defensive behavior show stress. Never lift a lizard by its tail.

Avoid handling immediately after meals, during difficult sheds or when unwell. Wash hands and use dedicated equipment to reduce disease transfer.

Cleaning & Routine Maintenance

Daily: check the animal's access to water/appropriate moisture, temperatures, visible condition and equipment. Remove feces, contaminated material, dead feeders and spoiled food promptly.

Regularly: clean dishes and feeding surfaces, check thermostats and probes, inspect decor stability and maintain ventilation. Bioactive systems still require waste checks, food removal, plant care and drainage maintenance; they are not self-cleaning.

Record appetite, activity, shed history and weight or body condition when safe. Arrange veterinary assessment for unexplained changes. Quarantine new animals with dedicated tools, and disinfect only with a suitable product used at the label dilution/contact time, then rinse and dry as required before return.

Cohabitation

Individual housing is the safest routine default. Shared housing can cause food competition, injury or reproductive pressure even without obvious fighting. Never assume a male/female pair or female group is compatible. Breeding introductions belong in a planned specialist program with separate backup enclosures and individual monitoring.

Shedding & Seasonal Changes

Maintain access to a clean humid retreat and inspect toes, tail tip and eyes after shedding when observation is possible. Do not peel retained skin or apply oils/adhesives. Persistent constriction, damaged tissue or repeated failed sheds warrants veterinary help.

Seasonal changes in appetite or activity can occur. Check temperatures, hydration and weight before treating prolonged refusal as normal. Deliberate brumation or breeding cycles require healthy animals and species-specific preparation; pet care does not require forcing a seasonal shutdown.

Common Health Concerns

- Poor body condition or feeding decline: check the full gradient, hydration and food quality; arrange assessment for persistent refusal accompanied by weight loss.
- Calcium/vitamin imbalance: weakness, tremors, a soft or misshapen jaw or abnormal limbs require veterinary assessment; extra high-dose supplements are not a substitute for diagnosis.
- Skin, shed or injury problems: repeated retained skin, wounds, swelling or abnormal discoloration deserve prompt attention.

- Respiratory or systemic illness: labored/open-mouth breathing at rest, marked lethargy, loss of balance, persistent diarrhea or rapid deterioration require an experienced exotic veterinarian.