

Herp Habitats: Bearded Dragon

Create a simple, attractive bearded dragon vivarium.

By Rex Lee Searcey

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Photo by Rex Lee Searcey.

Most reptiles and amphibians have special environmental needs. If you want to have a healthy, happy pet that you can enjoy keeping, you must give it a home that meets these environmental needs. There are usually a variety of ways to set up housing for any kind of reptile or amphibian that are appropriate and will meet its needs. Different people have different ideas about what is best.

Beyond just meeting the needs of the animal, when I design an environment, I also try to accomplish additional goals. As much as possible, I want the enclosure to be natural and beautiful, simulate the animal's native habitat and be easy to maintain. I also want to keep the cost down and ensure that it fits the lifestyle and needs of the owner.

This article will show you how to create three very different kinds of homes for some different types of popular reptile and amphibian pets.

A Simple, Attractive Bearded Dragon Vivarium

Enclosure: Bearded dragons (*Pogona vitticeps*) are big lizards, so they need fairly large enclosures. A good enclosure for an adult bearded dragon is a glass reptile tank that is approximately 36 inches long by 16 inches wide by 17 inches deep (or about 40 gallons). A sliding screen top is also needed. Most people buy bearded dragons as babies. You can keep a young bearded dragon in a smaller tank, but it makes the most sense and saves money to get the bigger tank at the beginning.

Basking Light: The other piece of equipment you will need is a good light fixture. This basking light should be very bright and include the ultraviolet (UV) wavelengths of the spectrum that are important to the bearded dragon's health. The light should also provide a natural, overhead heat that feels like the warm rays of the sun. For the enclosure pictured in this article, I used a 160-watt, self-ballasted mercury vapor bulb. This wattage may be used for other similar lights.

Both wattage and lamp mounting height can vary depending on the type of light, the characteristics of the vivarium and the larger room environment. The key with bearded dragons is to have an appropriate wattage and mount the light at an appropriate height directly over the intended basking spot so that the temperature on that spot is 110 degrees Fahrenheit (as discussed later).

Plants: Because plants are a big part of the bearded dragon's diet, it is impractical for most novice keepers to set up a naturalistic bearded dragon vivarium using living plants. The dragon would destroy the plants. But you can set up a very attractive vivarium that has the look of the bearded dragon's native Australian landscape by using natural rock and sand. Later, as you become more knowledgeable, you can try using certain kinds of plants to create a more advanced, landscaped environment for your dragon.

Furnishings: For the bearded dragon vivarium pictured, I used red sandstone rock and matching crushed red sandstone sand. The bearded dragon's native environment often features red rocks and soils. The rocks for this vivarium were carefully selected to accomplish several purposes.

At one end of the enclosure, three rocks were stacked to form a perching/basking spot. These fit together perfectly so that they are sturdy and will not be dislodged by normal activities and movements of either the bearded dragon or its owner. The large base rock has an overhanging ledge that creates a cavelike space for hiding. The base rock sits on the tank bottom, with the sand around it, so the lizard cannot dig under the rock and potentially get stuck or injured.

The top rock is shaped so that it creates two perching areas, each about the size of a bearded dragon's body. Sometimes bearded dragons like to perch at an angle on an inclined rock or branch. One side of the rock provides this inclined perch with a slope of approximately 45 degrees. This perch is located just to one side of the basking light, where there is slightly less heat, and the dragon can comfortably survey its surroundings. The other rock surface, directly under the light, is level and provides an ideal basking spot.

At the other end of the tank is a water pool created from a large, flat piece of rock. The central area of this rock was ground down, using an angle grinder fitted with a masonry wheel, to create a depression. The deepest part is about 1½ inches.

Besides providing drinking water, the pool has other uses. The pool is large enough for a bearded dragon to fit almost its entire body. Although bearded dragons are desert lizards, they often enjoy a nice soak. This can help to hydrate them, cool them down a little if they feel too hot after basking, help soften the skin for shedding and even help them relax and promote easier defecation. With the right tool, grinding out the center of a piece of sandstone is fairly easy (grinding this piece took about a half hour).

Because sandstone and many other kinds of rock are porous and may allow water to seep out, the hollowed-out area was coated with an epoxy resin to make it watertight. A smaller rock was hollowed out in the same way to create a food bowl where a variety of plant foods are provided for the dragon. The food dish does not need to be coated with the resin.

You can also buy perches, caves, water and food bowls that imitate the look of natural rock. Additionally, you can purchase or collect attractive pieces of wood that also make nice perches and basking spots.

Location: The best place to locate a bearded dragon vivarium is near a bright window. Place the vivarium where it gets a little morning sunlight. However, be sure that there is always a shady, cool area where the bearded dragon can get out of the sunlight and heat. Never allow the vivarium to be in an area where it is in full sunlight. This can overheat the enclosure.

If you can't keep your bearded dragon vivarium next to a bright window, you may wish to add a second light, in addition to the basking light. The second light can be a smaller, full-spectrum, low-wattage daylight fluorescent light, which will provide a little extra light for the mental health and stimulation of the bearded dragon, but not the heat produced by the basking light. It is important that the basking light be at one end of the vivarium, leaving the other end of the vivarium as a cooler area where the dragon can escape from the hot light when it wants to.

Company: Bearded dragons do not need the company of other bearded dragons. A dragon will be perfectly happy with just you as a companion. But they also get along fairly well together, so you can keep more than one together if you want to and can provide enough space. If multiple dragons are going to be kept in the same tank, the enclosure needs to be larger. You will also need larger water and food dishes; extra perching spots and lighting may be required, as well. Each dragon needs a comfortable spot to perch and to bask under the ultraviolet light fixture.

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