

## Bearded Dragon Lizard Tips

### Tips on keeping the bearded dragon lizard.

*By Ron Tremper*

Three excited herpers gathered around the group of baby "bart agamas," as the Germans call them, at my center in Fresno, California. It was 1985, and in attendance were members of the Northern California Herp Society. I had just personally brought back the first captive-bred bearded dragons to reach the United States from the Frankfurt Zoo--now just look where this popular species has gone!

Bearded Dragon LizardA native of Australia, the bearded dragon is a daytime-loving member of the family Agamidae, is known to science as *Pogona vitticeps* (formerly *Amphibolurus vitticeps*). It is at home in nature in open grasslands and thorn shrub where the adult male bearded dragons prefer to spend most of their active hours atop fence posts or tree stumps on the lookout for other beardies entering their closely guarded territories. Adults reach 16 to 24 inches in total length. The skin below their throat is covered with heavily spined scales, and when a male encounters another male, he inflates this skin and appears to have a beard, hence the basis for their common name.

#### Beaded Dragons as Pets

The bearded dragon makes a fine pet for adults or children. When buying a pet shop dragon be sure to get one that is at least 5 inches long, because they tend to be a little delicate at the smaller size.

Whether at home on a termite mound in the outback or reclining in your home terrarium, the bearded dragon will eat most anything-plant or animal. Their diet in captivity must be varied and balanced with a good vitamin/mineral supplement if they don't have a chance to bask in an outdoor enclosure with native plants, which is the optimum situation for them. At our center, we offer our beardies five different food items each week: small mice, live crickets, superworms (*Zoophobas*), mixed greens and Madagascar hissing cockroaches. Two days of fasting are given following a meal of mice. They are also happy to take commercially sold bearded dragon pelleted diets, blossoms, wax worms and fruit pieces, which can be offered in a shallow feeding dish or paper plate at one end of their cage.

#### Housing

Housing bearded dragons over 5 inches long is simple and easy for any beginner. At our center, we allow 3 square feet of floor space for each dragon. Indoors, the use of livestock troughs, plastic tubs, glass aquariums work well to house newly acquired dragons. Avoid screen caging, because the lizards get their sharp claws caught easily, which can cause some very serious injuries.

Heat is the key to keeping bearded dragons thriving. A basking spot light is necessary and needs to be directed on a slanted 2-inch diameter tree limb or cage end where the lizard can raise its body temperature to the 95- to 110-degree Fahrenheit range. When a bearded dragon reaches his thermal maximum he will sit with his mouth open. This gaping of the jaws is natural and is a way for the lizard to expel some of the unneeded heat through direct air exchange with the inner throat tissues. At such times, it is important to have a "cool" end in their cage where they can move when they are hot enough.

The use of UVB-emitting fluorescent lighting is beneficial for bearded dragons, because, when given the opportunity, they spend much of their waking hours in direct sunlight. Water should be available at all times in an arrangement that prevents spillage.

The cage floor is best covered with newspaper, but, if you wish to be more fancy, the use of various colored sands, some of which are edible, will work for adults. Be careful when using small substrate particles with dragons that are less than 6 inches long, because they can cause fatal intestinal impactions when accidentally ingested. Bearded dragons do not need a hide box, but will welcome them if they are provided. Males never seem to get along, so never try to keep more than one male per cage. The desire to defend their own territory is so great it is best not to let adult males see one another across the room you house them in.

#### Other Considerations

The care of bearded dragons less than 5 inches long is sometimes more demanding than housing larger beardies. Your main goal should be to make sure they are close to their heat source and that you deliver water to them by spraying their

backs at least twice a day until they learn to drink from a dish of standing water. Baby bearded dragons enjoy fresh greens daily. The outer leaves of store-bought romaine lettuce (never iceberg lettuce) and dandelions are perfect sources of plant nutrients for the growing young.

Never place more than three young bearded dragons in a 10-gallon size cage with just one spot light for very long, because the most aggressive lizards will dominate the best basking spot and will be the first to eat. If this occurs, you will see a major size difference in the group of young over a period of two weeks. It will lead to stress and eventual death of the smaller bearded dragons if they are not moved to a cage with less competition.

However, with the availability of good basking spots and properly offered water, even a beginner can succeed with baby bearded dragons. They will live 5 to 10 years if they receive good care. Bearded dragons are also an excellent species for beginning herpetoculturists who want to start breeding reptiles. Due to their simple care and popularity, more than 50,000 of them are produced in captivity by hobbyists each year.

Since that now-famous day back in 1985, this lizard has firmly established itself amongst breeders and keepers of reptiles in the United States. Bearded dragon lizards can make fantastic pets and breeding subjects. So, with the bearded dragon's reputation for having a kind and personable demeanor, today is your best chance to get the dragon you always wanted!