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Bearded Dragon Basics

General Setup/Caging for young beardie

10-20 gallon tank (tall is great)	Branches for climbing
Basking heat source (ceramic bulb preferred)	Thermometer
Under-tank heating	Water spray bottle
Newspaper for substrate	Outdoor sunning cage (for summer)
	UVB source (mercury vapor bulb preferred)

Setup/Caging

While collecting ideas for permanent housing, approach the first two months with a temporary housing mindset. Newspaper is recommended as a substrate for the first couple of months, it isn't beautiful, but it is easy to clean and is completely safe.

Heat/Lighting

If you plan to use a UVB-producing light source, have a screen top or leave the top open.

- The dragon will need a basking area between 100-115°F.
- A drop light with a 75W-100W ceramic heat emitter bulb will provide sufficient heat.
- The remainder of the cage should be no lower than 75°-80°F.

- Depending on your house temperature, you may need some under-tank heating. Many types of pads are available at pet stores and online. The thermometers that adhere to tanks are great for monitoring temperatures. Do not use heat rocks, despite what many pet store employees will tell you.

- Arrange a branch just under the basking heat source. The beardie will self-regulate on temperature, as long as you provide a temperature gradient within the housing.

- Remember that if you gather branches from outside, they should be sterilized before going in with your new lizard.

Most, if not all, lizards, a few snakes, and turtles require UVB for generation of Vitamin D3, which is in turn necessary for absorption of calcium.

-For the summer, don't worry about providing UVB in the cage, if you can take the animal outside for natural sunlight. There are some great sunning cages available, or you can build a simple cage with window screens. Make sure that some of shade is always available, and maximize the air flow.

-Using a fine screen will prevent any contact with fire flies, which are highly toxic. If you are unable to provide natural sunlight (UVB does not pass through glass or plastic), you will need to provide the UVB through lighting. The best source is a mercury vapor bulb, of which several brands are available.

Feeding Insects/Greens

Offer insects morning and evening, greens in the afternoon. Purchased hatchlings should be readily eating greens, but if insects are present the lizards generally won't touch greens. On days when feeding only twice, feed greens in the mornings, insects at night. AEAH does not recommend crickets, having treated beardies too many times for parasites carried by crickets (plus, crickets stink, and they will chew on beardies overnight if not eaten).

We recommend small mealworms and young *Blaberus*, a flightless South American cockroach that you could easily raise if desired. You could also raise mealworms, but they're cheap over the web, and many pet stores carry them and crickets. It is also recommended to keep moistened artificial diet with the babies at all times and they eat it readily.

A good way to get babies to eat the pellets and drink is to place moistened pellets in a low-rimmed food dish (yogurt container lid) and spray the pellets with water. The movement of the water attracts the beardies, and they end up munching on pellets and drinking the water. Remember, variety is good. My adults get greens daily, with an irregular schedule of pellets, mealworms, and *Blaberus*. If you see insect exoskeletons passing through your animal, raise the low temperatures in the cage. Many people will tell you that mealworms are not digested well by beardies and cause impactions, but I suspect that those people had their animals too cold for efficient digestion. Freeze-dried crickets are available, and I have no information about their nutritional content, but I know several people who use them for beardies. Food should be dusted with calcium dust 4-5 days/week. The calcium dust should contain no phosphorous and must contain Vitamin D3, if direct sunlight and/or a UVB source is not available.

Handling

Every day, carefully pick up your beardie and let it sit on your hand inside the cage, then let it escape when it wants. Get it used to being held and released. It may occasionally open its mouth and gape at you, but if it was to bite in defense, it couldn't hurt you at this age, and that behavior will disappear rapidly. You will need to lift the beardie out to transfer it to a sunning cage, so remember that it can move extremely fast. You can gently place a thumb on its back between its front legs and restrain it from moving during the transfer. Eventually, you'll walk around the house with a very trusting beardie on your shoulder.

Long-Term Housing Suggestions

A 40-50 gallon tank is sufficient for an adult beardie, but they'll use more space, if available. Vertical space, with lots of branches is nice, because beardies love to climb. Many cages are commercially available. If you make your own, avoid sealants, glues, and paints that might let off noxious gases.

Ceramic heating elements are best for the basking area--get a thermostat to control the temperature. Be aware that you need a fixture that will handle the wattage of the heat bulb. A standard drop light from your local hardware store is not safe for use with a ceramic heating element!

It is imperative that a source of UVA/B for Vitamin D3 generation be provided. If your animal has been fortunate enough to have spent 12 or more hours a week in the sun during the summer, the UVB over the winter will not be as vital, particularly if you continue to dust with calcium/D3, but I still recommend a year-round source of UVB.

Substrates

Many beardie owners use sand as a substrate, but exotics vets have seen sand impaction problems, plus sand can be hard to clean. Impaction will be less of a problem if the animal receives sufficient water, does not eat food off the sand, has appropriate heat, and has no other health issues. Corn cob and walnut husk/shell substrates are out. Reptile carpet is hard to clean, requiring cleaning after each fecal pass. I use rabbit alfalfa pellets once my animals are 3-4 months old. The disadvantage of alfalfa pellets is that you need to soak the animal every 1-2 weeks for water, because the pellets disintegrate and will mold if wet (can't have a water dish with alfalfa pellets). The advantages far outweigh that one disadvantage, though. From an aesthetic viewpoint, I like the looks of pellets, but that's entirely personal. If accidentally ingested, the pellets pose no health problems and are, in fact, very digestible and contain excellent nutrition and high calcium. Finally, odor from the feces is rapidly absorbed by the pellets, which is a huge plus with several well-fed adults. I go to the local feed store for my alfalfa, but you can buy smaller amounts at pet stores. Many reptile veterinarians recommend either alfalfa pellets or newspaper.

Additional Resources

Keep in mind that everybody has a different opinion on feeding, housing, heating, UVB, watering, etc. My opinions on feeding primarily greens, rather than primarily insects, came from reading about an observational study of beardedies in Australia. During the course of the study, the researchers determined that 75-80% of the beardedies' diet is greens, not insects, contradicting the then-common feeding regimen of captive beardedies. A diet too high in protein can lead to kidney failure in turtles and iguanas, and may be an issue in beardedies, though unproven.

- Bean Farm (www.beanfarm.com) for supplies (ceramic heat source, UVB bulbs, thermostats, etc.). The owners have decades of experience in herpeto-culture and carry excellent equipment at reasonable prices.

Lastly, veterinarians specializing in the care and medicine of reptiles are also an excellent source of information. Most will recommend once to twice yearly fecal parasite checks (many prey items, particularly crickets, can carry parasites to beardedies,) and once a year check-ups. Additionally, they can help you with dietary, behavior and husbandry issues as they come up and can help you prevent future problems. Check out the Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians website (www.ARAV.org) for herp-knowledgeable veterinarians in your area.