



The Bearded Dragon Family

DESCRIPTION:

Both the Central (inland) and the Eastern (coastal) bearded dragon grow to a maximum size of about 250mm snout to vent length (SVL). However, some monster specimens of the central bearded dragon do occur, particularly in SW Queensland and I have seen some closer to 350mm SVL - and that does not include the tail !

The Pygmy Bearded dragon is at the other end of the scale not growing much bigger than 150mm SVL. The natural colour of all three species is generally a shade of grey however, reddish and orangy coloured individuals of the central bearded dragon do occur in the wild and are highly sought after. These colour variations are now being selectively enhanced and within the coming years some distinct morphs should emerge. The pygmy bearded dragon also has some potential with a very attractive hypomelanistic (white) morph under development by myself.

DISTRIBUTION:

Both the Central and the Eastern bearded dragon occur over a large area of the eastern half of the continent. There is not much overlap between the two with the Eastern bearded dragon occurring adjacent to the coast and the Central bearded dragon occurring over the drier interior areas. The Pygmy bearded dragon occurs over a very small area of Mitchell grass plains in central northern Queensland.

ECOLOGY:

All three species are diurnal (day-active) often observed perching where they can keep a look out for predators, prey, rivals and mates.

DIET:

Omnivorous dragons consuming insects, small vertebrates, leaves, fruits and flowers.



BREEDING BIOLOGY:

All three species may produce two or more clutches over a season with the first clutch being laid in October and the second in January. Gravid females become more conspicuous during this time as they require extra heat for the developing eggs and are often seen basking on roads.

CAPTIVE HUSBANDRY:

These three species are the most commonly kept of Australia's six species of bearded dragon. The central and the pygmy do very well under most circumstances but the eastern does not seem to adjust very well to captivity over the long term. However, easterns can do well in outdoor setups providing you are within their natural climatic range.

Designing and decorating indoor enclosures for bearded dragons requires some thought. Hatchlings can live happily live in a 2 foot by 2 foot enclosure but adults require a cage at least 3 feet wide and 2.5 feet high. This creates a degree of heat gradient and also allows your lizards to be able to get away from each other if they want to. Sand is a perfect substrate. Not only can you conveniently sieve out the droppings but sand also seems to prevent toe and foot problems developing.

Having a vertical dimension to your cage is important because in the wild beardies like to climb objects. A log or branch cut to the right length is perfect. A pile of stones is fine although a bit less convenient. There is also a large range of resin and foam based artificial cage decorations to suit every occasion. It is a good idea to have a heat source such as a basking light attached to the top of the cage so the lizards can bask while perching on top of their elevated object. This both satisfies their curious nature and allows them to warm up sufficiently to digest their food. Bearded dragons do require access to ultra violet light which is important for metabolic function and calcium absorption. A 5% UV bulb works just fine and should be set on a timer to operate for at least 6 to 8 hours a day. In addition to a UV light, you should provide radiant heat in the form of at least one basking light. The thermostat for this light should be set to 35 degrees celcius. By positioning your heat sources you should aim to achieve a heat gradient of between 35 and 20 degrees celcius from the top to the bottom of the cage. Your lizards can then decide where they want to be. Remember that all radiant heat sources should be separated from the lizards by a mesh screen or light guard or your dragons will burn themselves.

You should also place a hide box on the floor of the enclosure so the beardies can totally escape all heat and light if they want to. A plastic tub with a hole cut in the top



and $\frac{3}{4}$ filled with damp coconut fibre works great. They may use this to assist them in shedding, to lay eggs in or just to get a break from their cage mates. If the cage is large enough you can keep more than one male however their will always be a degree a stress among your lizards if you do. A single male and several females is an ideal ratio.

Providing a proper balanced diet for your beardies will require some effort on your part. Hatchlings require mostly live insects during the first 4 or 5 months of life. However, you should also offer veggies to get them used to the idea of eating them in future.

Baby crickets, woodies and superworms make perfect food. They should be lightly dusted with a calcium supplement powder every second feed and with a multivitamin supplement every fourth feed.

Live insects should be presented to the lizards in a bowl coated with fleuron paint. This both prevents the insects from escaping and hiding inside the enclosure and also makes it very easy for the lizards to catch them. As they grow the beardies should be offered a greater choice and quantity of greens including: rocket, kale, spinach, broccoli, green beans, alfalfa, clover, cabbage, bok choy, squash, pumpkin, grated carrot and bean sprouts. They also relish yellow dandelion flowers. A calcium phosphate supplement powder should be mixed in with the greens every second feed.

You can also add a pinch of the supplement powder to their water bowl. Never feed avocado, bran or rhubarb as they are reported to be toxic to beardies. It is also wise to start offering them a commercially made pelletised food at an early age. If you do so, by the time they reach maturity, they will readily accept pellets as just another part of their diet. This a very convenient food option for the owner to have but should only be used as a supplement.

Buying live crickets can be expensive and culturing them is quite difficult. I recommend breeding woodies and superworms as a cheap and easy alternative and your lizards will never complain.

Young beardies will grow fast on the diet recommended above.

They can be sexually mature and reproduce as early as one year old with females laying up to 3 clutches over a summer. Sexing is possible from the age of about 4 or 5 months with males having a larger cloacal opening and also distinct buldges and channels developing where the hemipenes are contained within the base of the tail. Beardies can live for up to 10 years in captivity and particularly the central and pygmy dragon, make excellent pets.