Bearded Dragon

Pogona vitticeps

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Quick Facts

Scientific name	*Pogona vitticeps* (Ahl, 1926)
Common names	Central / Inland Bearded Dragon, "beardie"
Family	Agamidae
Origin	Central and eastern Australia
Adult size	16–24 in (40–60 cm) total length, including tail
Lifespan	9–12 years in captivity (often longer with good care)
Experience level	Beginner-friendly, but equipment-heavy up front
Temperament	Docile, alert, tolerant of handling once settled
Venom	None — completely non-venomous
Activity	Diurnal (day-active), needs a strong day/night light cycle

Natural History

The central bearded dragon comes from the hot, dry interior of central and eastern Australia, where it ranges across open woodland, arid acacia scrub, mallee, and sandy desert. It is one of the most widespread lizards on the continent precisely because it tolerates harsh, variable conditions — blistering days, cool nights, and stretches where food is scarce.

Beardies are semi-arboreal baskers. In the wild they perch on fallen timber, fence posts, and low branches to soak up sun and survey their territory, dropping to ground cover when threatened. That basking behavior is the single most important thing to understand about keeping them: they are heliothermic, meaning they regulate body temperature by shuttling between hot sun and shade, and they use UVB from sunlight to manufacture vitamin D3 and properly use dietary calcium. A captive setup that fails to reproduce strong overhead heat and UVB will fail the animal, no matter how well everything else is done.

Their diet shifts with age. Hatchlings and juveniles are heavily insectivorous to fuel rapid growth, while adults become increasingly herbivorous, with leafy greens and vegetables making up the larger share of the diet. This natural shift drives the captive feeding schedule below.

Housing

Enclosure Type & Size

Bearded dragons need floor space and a long temperature gradient far more than height. For a single adult, provide a minimum of **4 ft long × 2 ft deep × 2 ft tall (120 × 60 × 60 cm)** — and bigger is always better. That footprint is what lets you build a genuine hot end and cool end in the same enclosure. Hatchlings and small juveniles can be raised in a smaller enclosure or sectioned-down space so they can find food easily, but they grow fast and will need full adult housing within months.

A front-opening glass terrarium or a PVC enclosure both work well. Bearded dragons should be housed **singly** — they are territorial, and cohabitation routinely leads to stress, dominance, missing toes or tails, and outright fighting, even between pairs that "seem fine."

Substrate

For most keepers, the safest choice is a non-particulate substrate: tile, sealed slate, textured reptile carpet (kept clean), or a firm packed surface. Loose particulate substrates carry an impaction risk, especially with juveniles and any dragon that feeds enthusiastically off the floor. Experienced keepers sometimes use a deep, packable bioactive soil/sand blend that holds a burrow, but this is an intermediate-level setup — if in doubt, go non-particulate.

Hides & Decor

Provide at least one secure hide on the cool end so the dragon can fully thermoregulate and feel safe, plus elevated basking furniture (sturdy branches, rock, or a basking platform) on the warm end that lets the animal get close to the heat source. Backgrounds and climbing decor suit their semi-arboreal nature and reduce stress.

Temperature

Build a clear gradient and verify every zone with a digital probe or temp gun — never rely on the dial on a thermostat alone.

Zone	Target
Basking surface (warm end)	100–110°F (38–43°C)
Warm side ambient	85–95°F (29–35°C)
Cool side ambient	75–80°F (24–27°C)
Night-time	Allow a drop to roughly 65–75°F (18–24°C); no light needed

Heat is best provided by a white **halogen flood/basking lamp** mounted overhead on the warm end, which delivers the bright, focused, infrared-rich heat dragons evolved to bask under. Position the basking perch so the animal's back sits at the correct surface temperature. At night, a dragon does not need heat unless your room drops well below the low 60s°F — and if supplemental heat is needed then, use a non-light-emitting source so the photoperiod isn't disrupted.

Humidity

These are arid-climate animals. Aim for a low ambient humidity, roughly **30–40% RH**, with good ventilation. Chronically high humidity contributes to respiratory infections and scale problems. A simple water dish and the moisture from fresh greens are usually enough; routine misting is not required.

Lighting & UVB

UVB is not optional for this species — it is as essential as heat. Without it, dragons cannot synthesize vitamin D3, cannot use dietary calcium, and develop **metabolic bone disease (MBD)**: soft bones, deformities, tremors, and eventually death.

Use a high-output **linear T5 HO UVB tube** (not a compact/coil bulb) running roughly **half to two-thirds the length of the enclosure**, mounted on the warm end so it overlaps the basking zone. Bulb strength is matched to the distance between the tube and the dragon's highest basking spot:

- Basking surface **10–12 in (25–30 cm)** below the tube → a **6% (T5 HO)** bulb
- Basking surface **12–18 in (30–45 cm)** below → a **12% (T5 HO)** bulb
- Basking surface up to **24 in (60 cm)** below → a **14% (T5 HO)** bulb

If the tube sits above mesh, account for the UVB the mesh blocks. Replace UVB tubes on the manufacturer's schedule (typically every 12 months for T5 HO) — output fades long before the bulb stops producing visible light. Run a consistent **12–14 hours of light per day**, with full darkness at night.

Feeding

Bearded dragons are omnivores whose diet shifts from mostly insects as babies to mostly plants as adults.

Prey & Plants

Insects: Feeder staples include dubia roaches, crickets, black soldier fly larvae, and occasional treats like hornworms or silkworms. **Avoid wild-caught insects** (pesticide and parasite risk) and use **mealworms/superworms sparingly** due to their hard chitin. As a sizing rule, no feeder should be larger than the space between the dragon's eyes, to avoid choking and impaction.

Gut-loading matters: feed your feeder insects nutritious greens and veg for 24–48 hours before offering them — dusting powder is a supplement, not a substitute for well-fed prey.

Greens & vegetables (the staple for adults): collard greens, mustard greens, turnip greens, dandelion greens, escarole, and squashes are excellent. Offer fruit only occasionally as a treat. Avoid spinach and other high-oxalate greens as a staple, since they bind calcium.

Feeding Frequency by Age

Age	Insects	Plants
Hatchling (0–3 mo)	Multiple insect feedings daily, as much as eaten in ~10–15 min	Fresh greens available daily
Juvenile (3–8 mo)	Insects roughly 1–2× daily	Greens daily, increasing share
Sub-adult (8–14 mo)	Insects about once daily	Greens daily
Adult (14+ mo)	Insects every other day (smaller portion)	Greens daily — now the bulk of the diet

Supplementation

Proper dusting is the second pillar (with UVB) of preventing MBD. General schedule, adjusted to your specific UVB setup:

- **Juveniles (fast-growing):** plain calcium (no D3) on most insect feedings; calcium **with** D3 a few times weekly; a reptile multivitamin about once weekly.
- **Adults:** plain calcium a couple of times weekly; calcium with D3 once or twice weekly; multivitamin about once weekly.

Do **not** dust every feeding with a D3 product on top of strong UVB — over-supplementing D3/vitamin A is a real risk. Match the schedule to your lighting and adjust for growth, breeding, or vet guidance.

Refusal & Fasting Notes

Appetite naturally dips with seasonal cooling and during **brumation** (a winter slow-down). A short refusal in a dragon with good body condition, correct temps, and current UVB is usually not an emergency. Prolonged refusal paired with weight loss, lethargy, sunken eyes, or black-bearding stress signals warrants a check of husbandry and a reptile vet.

Water

Provide a shallow, clean water dish; many dragons drink readily, others prefer water droplets or hydration from greens. Keep the dish clean and don't let it spike enclosure humidity. Some keepers offer occasional lukewarm soaks, especially to aid shedding or mild dehydration, but soaking is not a substitute for proper husbandry.

Handling

Bearded dragons are among the most handleable lizards and generally tolerate gentle, regular interaction well once acclimated. Support the whole body and limbs, keep early sessions short, and let a new dragon settle in for a

week or two before handling. Watch for stress signals — a darkened "beard," gaping, or flattening of the body — and give space when you see them. As with any animal, handling is done at the keeper's discretion and the dragon's comfort comes first.

Shedding

Unlike snakes, dragons shed in patches rather than one piece, and do so frequently when young and growing. Signs include dulled or grayish skin and flaking. Support healthy sheds with correct husbandry and the option of a warm soak; **do not peel stuck shed**, especially around toes and the tail tip, where retained shed can constrict and cause damage. Persistent stuck shed on digits or tail should be addressed promptly.

Health & Common Issues

The most common serious problem is **metabolic bone disease**, which is almost entirely preventable with correct UVB, calcium, and basking temperatures. Other issues to watch for include **impaction** (often linked to loose substrate, oversized prey, or too-cool temps that impair digestion), **respiratory infections** (favored by cold, damp, or stagnant conditions), **internal parasites** (especially in newly acquired animals — a fecal check is wise), and **adenovirus** in some lines. A dragon that is lethargic, not basking, losing weight, straining, or persistently dark-bearded should be seen by a reptile-experienced veterinarian.

Brumation

Many bearded dragons naturally brumate — a winter dormancy triggered by shortening days and cooling temps — during which they slow down, hide, and eat little or nothing for weeks to a couple of months. In a healthy adult this is normal. Ensure the animal is parasite-free and in good condition beforehand, keep clean water available, and do not force-feed a brumating dragon. Hatchlings and underweight or sick animals should generally be kept warm, lit, and feeding rather than allowed to brumate; consult a vet if unsure.

Breeding

Breeding is for established, captive-bred adults in excellent condition and is best attempted only once a keeper has the husbandry fully dialed in. It typically follows a controlled brumation/cooling cycle to trigger reproductive readiness, with careful conditioning of the female to support egg production and a proper lay box for nesting. Females can become egg-bound without adequate calcium and a suitable laying site, so breeding raises the stakes on every other parameter in this guide. Work only with healthy, unrelated, captive-bred stock.

Sources

This guide was compiled using commonly accepted husbandry practices from experienced keepers and industry-standard reptile care resources.