Bearded Dragon

Pogona vitticeps | Expanded owner guide | Feeding, habitat, daily care, health and costs

A bearded dragon can live for many years and needs a properly prepared adult habitat, suitable lighting, a varied diet and access to reptile-experienced veterinary care. Use this guide to plan before bringing one home.

At a glance

Bearded dragons are alert, daytime lizards from Australia. They may become accustomed to gentle handling, but each animal has its own temperament. They are not low-maintenance starter pets: the large enclosure, heating, UVB lighting, fresh greens, feeder insects and veterinary reserve all require ongoing planning.

How long do they live?

Plan for a long-term commitment of about 7 to 12 years, with some animals living longer. Published estimates vary: VCA gives about 7 to 12 years, while Merck lists a captive average of 5 to 10 years. Individual health, husbandry and veterinary care affect lifespan. Make a plan for the animal well beyond its juvenile stage.

Adult size and experience

Many adults reach roughly 18 to 24 inches from snout to tail. A beginner may be able to care for one when prepared for a spacious habitat, measured heat and UVB, daily fresh food, safe handling and specialist veterinary care.

Set up and measure the enclosure before purchase. Do not bring the animal home first and try to assemble essential lighting and heating afterward.



Illustrative species photograph

Care through every life stage

The routine changes as a dragon grows. Weight, body condition, appetite, activity and veterinary guidance are more useful than applying one feeding rule to every animal.

Young dragon

- Growth is rapid. Keep a reliable feeding and weight log, offer a varied diet appropriate to age and size, and verify the habitat often.

- Use appropriately sized feeder insects; remove leftovers. Provide fresh greens and clean water, too.

- Do not assume that a young animal will stay comfortable in a small temporary enclosure. Plan an adult habitat and upgrade before space or temperature control becomes inadequate.

Adult dragon

- Leafy greens generally make up a larger share of the diet as the dragon matures. Adjust insect frequency and portions to the animal’s health and body condition with a reptile veterinarian.

- Maintain the same measured environmental conditions and continue preventive veterinary checks.

Older dragon or one with a chronic condition

- Ask the veterinarian whether food texture, portions, feeding frequency, weight tracking or habitat access should change.

- Make basking, food and water easy to reach without removing safe choices or hiding places.

- A new drop in appetite or activity should not be dismissed as aging or seasonal rest without checking husbandry and health.

A simple care log

Record	How it helps
Weight and date	Shows gradual loss or gain more clearly than memory.
Foods offered and eaten	Helps the veterinarian assess variety, appetite and diet changes.
Temperature, UVB lamp and replacement date	Makes equipment changes and husbandry review easier.
Shedding, stool and behavior	Captures changes that may help triage health concerns.

Build a safe adult habitat

The enclosure should let the dragon move between a warmer basking area and a cooler retreat. Size and construction influence whether you can create a stable gradient and safe furnishings.

Core setup checklist

Item	What to plan
Enclosure	Choose secure adult-sized floor space. A common adult planning size is about 4 x 2 x 2 feet; confirm suitability for your individual dragon with a reptile veterinarian.
Heating	Provide a basking heat source with an appropriate thermostat or control method. Keep the animal from contacting hot bulbs or fixtures.
UVB	Select a reptile UVB system suitable for the enclosure. Follow lamp instructions for distance, mesh effects and replacement.
Temperature tools	Use digital thermometers at the warm and cool ends, plus an infrared thermometer for surface temperatures.
Furniture	Add a secure basking platform, stable climbing surfaces, hides, and dishes that cannot tip easily.

Set it up before the animal arrives

- Run heating and lighting for several days and write down readings at the basking surface and both ends of the enclosure.

- Check that lights reach the animal as intended and are not blocked by glass or plastic. Secure cords and prevent falls or escape.

- Place the enclosure away from kitchen food-preparation areas, drafts, direct household hazards and unsupervised pets.

- Ask the clinic that will treat your dragon to review the planned setup. Save the exact lamp model, fixture, distance and temperature readings.

Do not rely on a printed number alone. Correct temperature and UVB depend on the actual lamp, reflector, distance, mesh and enclosure. Measure and verify.

Heat, UVB and the day-night cycle

Bearded dragons depend on external heat and UVB to support normal activity, digestion and calcium use. A lamp that turns on is not proof that the animal receives the right exposure.

Create a usable temperature gradient

- Provide a warm basking area and cooler areas so the dragon can move away from heat.

- Place air-temperature probes where the animal spends time. Use an infrared thermometer to check basking surfaces; a surface reading and an air reading answer different questions.

- Use a thermostat or other appropriate temperature control for the heat source. Re-check after moving lamps, changing bulbs, changing seasons or cleaning the enclosure.

UVB setup

- Use a reptile-specific UVB fixture and tube selected for this species and enclosure. A compact bulb may not illuminate enough of a long habitat.

- Follow the maker’s guidance for distance and replacement. Mesh, reflectors and lamp aging affect output.

- Keep a dated note of bulb installation and replacement. If the dragon is unusually weak, has poor appetite or shows abnormal jaw or limb changes, arrange veterinary assessment rather than increasing UVB at random.

Lighting schedule

- Use a dependable timer for the normal daytime light cycle and darkness overnight. Avoid leaving bright lights on continuously.

- If the room or enclosure temperature drops unexpectedly, check the animal and equipment. Do not use an unregulated heat rock or a lamp the animal can touch.

When readings change

First check that the thermometer works and is placed correctly. Inspect the bulb, thermostat, fixture, mesh and room conditions. If you cannot restore stable conditions promptly, contact the reptile clinic for interim advice.

Source note: VCA emphasizes a thermal gradient and species-appropriate UVB, and recommends veterinary review of setup. See the references at the end of this guide.

Flooring, hides, furniture and cleaning

A practical enclosure is secure, easy to keep clean and arranged so the animal can bask, hide and move without injury.

Choose flooring carefully

- Use an easy-to-clean material appropriate to the dragon and its stage of life. Paper products or suitable solid surfaces may be practical while monitoring a new animal.

- Small loose particles can be swallowed with food. Ask a reptile veterinarian before using loose substrate, especially for a juvenile, sick dragon or animal with prior digestive problems.

- Avoid scented bedding, cedar products and any material that can trap toes, hold waste or be chewed into sharp pieces.

Make furniture stable

- Secure rocks, branches and basking platforms so they cannot roll, tip or fall. Keep climbing routes low enough to limit injury from a fall.

- Provide a hide in both warmer and cooler parts of the enclosure when possible. Hiding is a normal choice, not misbehavior.

- Use shallow, sturdy water and food dishes. Remove damaged, cracked or sharp furnishings.

Daily and weekly cleaning

When	Routine
Daily	Remove stool and uneaten food; refresh water; check the animal and equipment.
As needed	Replace soiled flooring and wash dishes. Clean up spills promptly.
Regular schedule	Wash and disinfect enclosure furnishings using a reptile-safe method. Follow product directions and rinse/dry fully before returning items.

Keep reptile equipment away from kitchen sinks and food surfaces. Wash hands with soap and water after handling the dragon, feeders, water, stool or enclosure items.

Nutrition basics

Bearded dragons are omnivores. A suitable diet combines plant foods and feeder insects, with proportions changing as the dragon grows. One fixed menu or supplement schedule does not fit every animal.

Build variety

- Offer a rotation of suitable leafy greens and vegetables. Wash produce and cut it into pieces the dragon can manage.

- Examples often used in reptile-vet feeding guidance include collard or mustard greens, dandelion greens, endive, squash and bell pepper. Confirm individual choices with your veterinarian.

- Offer appropriately sized feeder insects from a dependable source. Variety matters; avoid relying on one feeder species.

- Fruit is not a daily staple. Avoid fireflies and wild-caught insects, which can be toxic or contaminated.

Age and body condition

Dragon	General approach	Individualize
Growing juvenile	Usually needs more frequent insect meals than an adult, alongside greens and fresh water.	Growth, feeder size, appetite and weight trend.
Adult	Leafy greens usually become a larger share, with appropriate insects as part of a varied plan.	Body condition, activity and veterinary advice.
Ill, underweight or overweight	Do not use a generic schedule to correct a health problem.	A reptile veterinarian should set the plan.

Portions and frequency

There is disagreement among care sources about exact ratios and meal schedules. Age, growth, body condition, reproductive status and health matter. Ask your reptile veterinarian for a written plan that identifies which foods are staples, which are occasional, how often to feed insects, and how to monitor weight.

A dragon that stops eating may be too cold, stressed or ill. Check measured habitat conditions and contact a reptile veterinarian if the change is persistent or paired with other signs.

Feeder insects, supplements and food safety

Feeder insects are part of the diet, but what the insects eat and how supplements are used can affect the dragon’s nutrition.

Feeder insect routine

- Use captive-raised insects from a reputable supplier. Do not collect insects from yards, gardens or roadsides.

- Feed insects a suitable gut-loading diet before offering them. Remove insects the dragon does not eat so they do not bite or stress it.

- Choose prey that is safely sized for the dragon. Ask the veterinarian which feeder species and sizes are appropriate.

- Keep feeder insects in clean, escape-proof containers with species-appropriate food and water sources. Do not place their care equipment in kitchen food areas.

Calcium and vitamins

- Ask the veterinarian which calcium and vitamin supplements to use and the correct frequency for this dragon, its age, diet and UVB setup.

- Do not combine several products or add extra vitamin D3 without guidance. Excess supplementation can also cause harm.

- Keep product labels and note the date opened. Measure only as directed; do not guess at a heavy coating.

Prepared commercial foods

Some packaged diets can be convenient, but do not assume a pellet or dried-food product can replace fresh greens and appropriately selected feeder insects. Ask the veterinarian whether a particular product belongs in your dragon’s plan and how to use it.

Food and hydration log

- Write down foods offered, approximate amount eaten, feeder type, supplements and any refusals.

- Take a photo of the exact food or supplement label to the veterinary visit if you have a question.

Current veterinary sources note that dietary recommendations can vary and evolve. Follow an individualized plan from a reptile-experienced veterinarian rather than copying a supplement schedule from a general book or online post.

Water, hydration and bathing

Fresh water should always be available. Guidance differs on scheduled soaking: some veterinary references recommend shallow warm soaks, while many keepers and clinics treat bathing as optional rather than a required weekly routine.

Daily water routine

- Keep a stable, shallow water dish with clean water available. Replace it daily and sooner if soiled.

- Wash or mist produce so it contains moisture. Offer water in a way the dragon can access safely.

- Monitor normal appetite, stool, activity and weight. A bath is not a reliable way to diagnose or treat dehydration.

Should I bathe my dragon?

A routine bath is not essential for every healthy dragon if it has clean water, appropriate food and correct habitat conditions. A short, closely supervised soak may be useful for a particular practical reason or if your veterinarian recommends it. Do not bathe by the calendar just because a general guide suggests it.

If a soak is recommended

- Use a clean, stable container and shallow, comfortably warm water. The dragon must be able to keep its head above the water and stand securely.

- Stay within arm’s reach the entire time. Never leave the dragon alone in water, even briefly.

- Use plain water only; no soap, shampoo, oils or additives. Stop if the dragon struggles, becomes weak or appears distressed.

- Dry and return the dragon to its correctly heated enclosure. Clean and disinfect the bathing container away from food-preparation areas.

Do not use bathing to treat illness

- Weakness, sunken eyes, persistent refusal to drink or eat, straining, retained shed, constipation or suspected obstruction need veterinary advice. A sick or weak reptile can drown in shallow water.

- Do not force water into the mouth or give home fluids unless a veterinarian instructs you.

For a normal healthy dragon: offer clean water every day. Bath only when there is a reason and the dragon can be supervised safely; ask the veterinarian about individual needs.

Handling, trust and body language

Build familiarity gradually. Some dragons tolerate brief handling; others prefer observing from the enclosure. The animal must be able to retreat.

A low-stress introduction

Step	What to do	Pause when
Observe	Move slowly and let the dragon watch you without reaching in.	It repeatedly retreats or freezes.
Offer a hand	Place a clean hand nearby and wait. Do not grab from above.	It tries to escape or shows defensive behavior.
Lift with support	When settled, support the chest, belly and all feet with both hands. Keep it level and close to a safe surface.	It struggles, pants or repeatedly tries to flee.
Return gently	End briefly and calmly. Give the dragon quiet time in its habitat.	Never chase, restrain or grab the tail.

Read the whole situation

- Arm waving or head bobbing can be communication. Meaning depends on context; one movement alone does not diagnose a problem.

- Hiding is normal. Repeated hiding or avoidance can also signal stress, a habitat issue or illness. Review recent changes.

- A dark beard, open-mouth basking or glass-surfing can have different explanations. Look at duration, temperature and other signs.

- A new, persistent behavior change, especially with loss of appetite, weight change or weakness, deserves a husbandry check and veterinary advice.

Children and household hygiene

Children should interact only with attentive adult supervision. Reptiles can carry Salmonella without looking sick. Wash hands after contact with the animal, feeder insects, tank water, stool or equipment. Keep reptile supplies out of kitchens and food areas.

Training and enrichment

Training should encourage voluntary, calm participation. It is enrichment, not a promise that a dragon will come when called or enjoy being carried.

Short positive sessions

- Choose a quiet time when the dragon is alert and the enclosure conditions are normal.
- Use one consistent cue, such as presenting an open hand near the enclosure entrance. Reward a calm voluntary approach with an appropriate tiny food reward if it fits the feeding plan.
- Keep practice brief. Stop while the dragon is relaxed. Repeat another day rather than pushing longer.
- For carrier practice, place a secure carrier in view and let the dragon explore it gradually. Never delay necessary veterinary care to complete training.
- Avoid startling, tapping the glass, chasing, punishment or withholding normal food to force a response.

Safe enrichment

- Use stable basking and climbing surfaces, hides and supervised access to a safe area.
- Change one enclosure item at a time so the dragon can still find familiar hides and basking areas.
- Secure branches and rocks. Remove anything sharp, unstable, toxic or small enough to swallow.
- If taking the dragon outdoors in suitable weather, use direct supervision, shade, escape protection and a safe temperature. Never leave it unattended or depend on sunlight filtered through window glass for UVB.

A simple session record

Date	Cue or activity	Response	What kept the dragon calm?
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

If behavior changes, first ask whether the habitat, daily routine, temperature, lighting, feeding or access to hiding places changed. Contact a reptile veterinarian when a change is persistent or paired with health signs.

Shedding, grooming and daily health checks

Bearded dragons shed in patches. Normal shedding can take time; do not peel skin off or apply products to make it come away.

Shedding and grooming

- Observe toes, tail tip and skin during normal care. If a band of old skin appears tight, dark or swollen, contact a reptile veterinarian.

- Do not pull retained skin, trim nails, apply oils or use human grooming products without veterinary direction.

- Keep stable, species-appropriate habitat conditions and provide safe surfaces. If shedding repeatedly looks abnormal, the veterinarian can check husbandry and health.

Quick daily observation

Check	What to notice
Appetite and water	What was offered and whether eating or drinking differs from normal.
Movement and posture	Alertness, coordination, weakness or unusual difficulty walking.
Skin, mouth, eyes	Injury, discharge, swelling, retained shed or unusual color.
Stool and weight	Frequency and appearance of stool; weight trend over time.
Habitat readings	Measured warm and cool zones, lamp function and timer.

Preventive veterinary care

- Arrange a baseline examination soon after acquisition. Ask about a preventive schedule, fecal testing, nutrition, parasites, body condition, jaw and limb strength, lighting and calcium balance.

- Healthy reptiles still benefit from veterinary checks. Follow the interval recommended for this dragon.

- Keep the veterinarian’s contact information and an emergency clinic option where you can find them quickly.

Illness, treatment and when to seek help

Only a veterinarian can diagnose the cause of symptoms and choose treatment. Reptile illness may look subtle, and the same sign can have different causes.

Signs that need prompt veterinary advice

Sign noticed	What to do
Labored or open-mouth breathing at rest, mouth discharge	Call a reptile veterinarian or emergency clinic promptly.
Severe weakness, tremors, inability to move normally	Seek urgent veterinary care. Keep the dragon secure and at its normal safe temperature during transport.
Persistent refusal to eat, unexplained weight loss, repeated straining	Contact the clinic for triage; do not force-feed or give laxatives.
Soft or swollen jaw or limbs, injury, burns	Arrange an examination. Do not increase supplements or treat the injury with household products.
Retained skin constricting toes or tail, eye changes	Ask a reptile veterinarian what to do. Do not pull or cut skin.

What treatment may involve

Depending on the examination, the veterinarian may recommend a fecal test, imaging, blood work, medication or supportive care. Treatment depends on the cause. Correcting an equipment or diet problem may be part of care, but does not replace diagnosis when an animal is sick.

Do not self-treat

- Never give human, dog or cat medicine, leftover antibiotics, vitamins or antiparasitic products unless the reptile veterinarian specifically prescribes them.
- Do not syringe water or food into the mouth, induce vomiting, use oils, or attempt to remove an obstruction.
- Do not assume low activity is brumation, normal shedding, stress or “being picky” when there are other changes.

If breathing is difficult, the dragon is very weak, has a serious injury or cannot move normally, call an emergency clinic now. Ask whether they treat reptiles before you travel.

Approximate costs in the United States

These are planning ranges, not quotes. Costs vary by state, retailer, enclosure type, shipping, tax, animal age and how often feeder insects are purchased.

Expense	Approximate planning range	Notes
Adult-size enclosure	$250-$400	A current 4 x 2 x 2-foot example is listed at $299 by Dubia.com; Zen Habitats lists models from $324. Stand and shipping may be extra.
UVB fixture and tube	$80-$160	Current examples vary by fixture length and kit; replace tube as directed.
Heat fixture, bulbs and control	$50-$150	Depends on enclosure, control method and spare bulbs.
Thermometers, timer and infrared thermometer	$40-$120	Choose reliable digital instruments; more than one reading point is useful.
Hides, basking area, dishes and safe flooring	$60-$180	Can be lower with safe household materials or higher with commercial décor.
Initial basic setup total	About $500-$1,000	Before the animal, food, tax, shipping, stand or emergency reserve.

Ongoing budget

- Food, feeder insects and supplements: roughly $30-$100 per month as a planning estimate; juveniles, shipping and feeder choices can change this considerably.

- Electricity and replacement bulbs: set aside about $10-$25 per month. Actual use depends on local electricity rates and equipment.

- Routine reptile-vet examination: budget about $85-$200 for an exam example; testing and treatment add cost. One Orlando exotic clinic lists an $85 wellness exam and a $155-$185 emergency exam; local prices differ.

- Emergency care: keep a separate reserve if possible. Diagnostics, hospitalization or surgery can cost hundreds or more; call local reptile clinics for their fee schedule and after-hours policy.

Do not choose a smaller habitat or skip UVB, temperature controls or veterinary care to meet a low budget. Wait until the full setup and ongoing care are affordable.

Price sources and checked November 2026: Dubia.com, Zen Habitats, Chewy, Exotic Animal Hospital of Orlando. Prices can change; check retailers and clinics directly.

Choosing a dragon and preparing for ownership

A responsible choice starts with the individual animal, its records, your local rules and a prepared habitat.

Questions for a seller or rescue

- What is the exact species, age, sex if known, hatch date and source? Is it captive-bred?
- What foods does it eat now? Can I see feeding, shedding and veterinary records?
- Has it been examined by a reptile veterinarian? Can I arrange an independent examination after transfer?
- What are its usual behavior, handling tolerance and any known health concerns?
- What is the return or rehoming policy if the animal is ill or the match cannot continue?

Before you commit

- Confirm city, county and state rules for keeping, transporting, selling and rehoming the species.
- Locate a reptile-experienced veterinarian and an emergency clinic that accepts reptiles.
- Finish the adult habitat, test its temperature and lighting, and budget for routine and emergency care.
- Make sure every household member can follow handwashing, food safety and supervision rules.

Travel and clinic preparation

- Use a secure, ventilated carrier lined with clean paper or a non-slip towel. Keep it out of direct sun, drafts and hot cars; never leave the dragon unattended in a parked vehicle.
- Call ahead to confirm that the clinic treats reptiles and ask whether to bring a fresh stool sample, recent weight log and habitat readings.
- For a serious health concern, follow the clinic’s instructions for temperature and transport. Do not improvise direct heat against the carrier.

Responsible ownership

- Never release a pet reptile outdoors. If you cannot continue care, contact a reptile rescue, humane organization or qualified rehoming resource.
- Do not breed or co-house dragons casually. Get veterinary and welfare guidance before any breeding decision.

An online care guide cannot inspect an animal or enclosure. Use it to prepare good questions and work with a veterinarian who regularly treats reptiles.

References and further reading

Use current veterinary sources for care decisions. Recommendations can differ, especially about feeding schedules, exact lamp placement and bathing frequency.

Veterinary and public-health references

VCA Animal Hospitals, Owning Bearded Dragons
VCA Animal Hospitals, Bearded Dragons - Housing
VCA Animal Hospitals, Feeding Bearded Dragons
VCA Animal Hospitals, Brumation in Bearded Dragons
Merck Veterinary Manual, Routine Health Care of Reptiles
Merck Veterinary Manual, Disorders and Diseases of Reptiles
Merck Veterinary Manual, Average Life Span of Reptiles in Captivity
CDC, Reptiles and Amphibians

Additional books provided for further reading

Alisha Cuarenta, The Complete Guide to Bearded Dragon Care and Ownership
Alex Reid, Bearded Dragon Care for Beginners: Complete Step-By-Step Guide to Habitat Setup, Feeding, Bonding and Handling

These titles are supplementary reading. Verify husbandry, medical and nutritional details against current reptile-veterinary guidance; do not rely on any single book as an individual diagnosis or treatment plan.

Price examples checked November 9, 2026

Dubia.com, 4 x 2 x 2 Bearded Dragon Enclosure
Zen Habitats, 4 x 2 x 2 Bearded Dragon Enclosure
Chewy, Arcadia Pro T5 Dragon UVB Kit
Exotic Animal Hospital of Orlando, Veterinary Service Pricing

Educational guide only. It does not replace individualized veterinary advice or current local legal requirements. Seek urgent veterinary help for breathing difficulty, severe weakness, serious injury or inability to move normally.