

Bearded Dragons are from the land down under and are smaller when full grown and more docile than green iguanas or monitor lizards. They may be just the exotic pet for you.

The seven species of dragons are all native to Australia. Species are distinguished by the spines on their throats. When inflated in a defensive, open mouth posture, these appear to be a large beard; hence the name. Yellow Bearded Dragons are the most common pet species. Originally all Dragons were imported, but are now being raised in the United States for pets. Dragons are easily socialized and gentled by frequent handling; however, they can run on their back legs. It is best to keep them on a leash when taking them outdoors.

Dragons require an enclosure (Vivarium) that is approximately four times their length (18") by twice their length and about 24" high that opens at the top to reduce escapes. Their enclosure should have dry sand or small gravel on the floor, a dish for water large and deep enough for them to soak in, and some rocks and tree limbs to climb on.

Potted plants often add to the appeal of their enclosure. A light source with a guard over it to prevent burns should be provided at one end as a heat source and for basking. Ideally the enclosure should have a cooler end (70-75 F) and a warmer end (80-85 F) with thermometers.

An additional UVB wavelength 290-320 nm light source is recommended, especially if your Dragon doesn't have access to outdoor light. Avoid heat rocks and infrared lights due to possible burns. A timer that turns the lights on and off with a 10-14 hour day is ideal. The enclosure should be cleaned at least weekly, the water changed frequently as needed and uneaten food removed daily.

In addition to their friendlier demeanor, smaller size and space requirement, Dragons are omnivorous, eating plant and animal material. This makes them easier to keep than green iguanas or monitor lizards. Iguanas are strict vegetarians and require an ultraviolet light source to make vitamin D for healthy bones. Lizards are carnivorous and require a source of live food (mice or chicks).

Dragons eat primarily insects (crickets, meal worms, wax worms) mixed with some chopped succulent vegetables (green beans and yellow/orange squash) and fruits (apple, cantaloupe, mango). It is important that the insects fed to the dragon are well fed also. Dragons will eat bugs and flowers from the garden and dandelions from the lawn, but be sure these have not been sprayed with chemicals.

Dragons are social and more than one can be kept in an enclosure, if all Dragons are of similar size. Avoid competition with aggression from overcrowding.

When properly cared for, Bearded Dragons are relatively disease free and hardy in captivity and may live for 10-20 years. Unfortunately Dragons often do not show signs of illness until it has become advanced. Although they may go for weeks without defecating, when a Dragon refuses food for several days or becomes unresponsive when handled, there is something

wrong. They should be taken as soon as possible to a veterinarian knowledgeable about these exotic pets.

As with all exotic pets, good sanitation and personal hygiene after handling is always recommended. Yearly wellness check ups with a veterinarian are strongly encouraged. A healthy Dragon makes a very delightful pet.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

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