

South Texas Dragons FAQ 12/22/12

Size & Age

Question: How big will my Bearded Dragon get?

Answer: Bearded dragons usually grow from 15"-20", and the average is around 18". There is also a breed of bearded dragon known as a German giant which can grow to 24" and weigh twice as much as a "normal" bearded dragon. There are many factors that can affect the growth of your bearded dragon, and the first 6 months are the most important. With proper care bearded dragons can grow from 3" to 16" or more in the first 6 months of their life. The factors which can influence the growth of your dragon include, the type and amount of food, genetics, enclosure size, proper heating & lighting, proper supplements & vitamins, competition for resources, stress, and the general health of the dragon.

Question: How can I tell how old my bearded dragon is?

Answer: Unfortunately it is impossible to tell the age of a bearded dragon without knowing the care it has received and their genetics. This is because the care that the dragon receives will have a big impact on the growth of the dragon, especially during the first 6 months of its life. A dragon given an insufficient amount of protein, insufficient UVB lighting, or improper care will not grow as well as a dragon provided a proper diet, sufficient lighting, and proper care. The genetics will also play an important role since each dragon has an individual genetic makeup and there will be a lot of variability in the sizes of clutch mates. We also breed a line of bearded dragons that are known as German giants and a lot of them are much larger, at all ages, than the normal bearded dragons. Although it is impossible to tell the exact age a bearded dragon, it is possible to get some clues from their behavior. Bearded dragons do not reach sexual maturity until they are 8 months to 1 ½ years old, so if they are, or are not, displaying mating behaviors can give you an age range. Also dragons less than 1 - 1 ½ years old do not bruminate, and this may help you depending on the time of year. Bearded dragons are omnivores and if you allow them to most dragons prefer to eat insects. However older dragons over 4-5 years old may prefer to eat more greens than insects and can give you an idea of the age.

Substrate

Question: What is the best substrate to use in the bottom of my bearded dragons cage?

Answer: There are many substrate options available to use for a bearded dragon, however some of them can be quite harmful. Try to avoid any type of particulate substrate because it can cause impaction which can be fatal. A good substrate should be non-absorbent, easy to clean, inexpensive, and unable to be ingested by the dragon. Unfortunately there is no perfect substrate, and each type has advantages & disadvantages. We have tried many different types of substrate and now use non-adhesive shelf liner. While this works for us, it may not be the best option for you. Some other good substrate materials include slate, tile, reptile carpet, news paper, masking

South Texas Dragons FAQ 12/22/12

paper, builder's paper, and paper towels. Play sand or reptile sand can be used as a substrate for bearded dragons once they are more than 10", but it should be sifted, washed, and baked at 200° for 1 hour, to sanitize it and reduce the change of impaction or infection. Smaller dragons must be kept on a substrate that cannot be ingested like slate, tile, paper towel, newspaper, or reptile carpet (as long as it does not have any frayed edges. The substrate should be spot cleaned daily and sanitized or replaced periodically depending on the type of substrate.

These are some of the options for substrates, and our thoughts on their use for bearded dragons. The descriptions are our opinion and are based on experience in using them, but remember that what works for us may not be the best option for you.

Paper towels, masking paper, builders' paper, and Newspaper: These make a good inexpensive substrate but for newspaper you need to make sure that the ink is soy based and not made from a toxic substance. They are difficult to spot clean and will need to be changed frequently since it will absorb the moisture from your dragons' waste which can become a breeding ground for germs. The moisture will also allow the paper to tear easily and may be ingested. The thinner paper products are not appropriate for older dragons since their increased weight & sharper claws will easily tear the paper increasing the chances of them ingesting it. When using any type of paper product for substrate, we recommend taping the edges to prevent the insects from hiding from your dragon, and prevent your dragon from ingesting any torn or frayed edges.

Cloth Towels or carpets: This is sometimes used as a substrate for babies, but it must be replaced & cleaned frequently since it will absorb the moisture from your dragons' waste which can become a breeding ground for germs. Make sure that you thoroughly rinse all of the soap out of the cloth since some chemicals in the detergent may be toxic to your dragon, and it should also be allowed to dry thoroughly.

Non adhesive shelf liner: This is relatively inexpensive and can be used by itself or with paper towels, reptile carpet, or other substrates. It is easily spot cleaned with non-alcohol wipes and napkins or paper towels. There are many types to choose from and they come in many patterns. Do not use the porous or thinner shelf liner since they can easily be pierced by bearded dragon claws and will trap moisture promoting the growth of bacteria. They should be sanitized at least every month with a 10% bleach solution or anti-microbial dish soap. Make sure that you thoroughly rinse all of the soap or bleach out of the cloth since some chemicals in the detergent may be toxic to your dragon, and the bleach can produce toxic fumes when exposed to high heat & UVB light. Also make sure it is dried thoroughly. Some of our older dragons love to dig, so we also include a small sandbox in their enclosures.

Tiles, Slate, & Rocks: This is another common choice for substrate and may be permanently attached to the enclosure or removable. If the slate or tile is glued & grouted then it cannot be removed and it has to be cleaned in the enclosure. You need

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South Texas Dragons FAQ 12/22/12

to make sure that whatever you use to clean it is completely removed or is non-toxic to your dragon. If it is not glued & grouted, it can be removed for easy cleaning, but it will also have gaps between the tiles that can trap waste & moisture which can breed mold & bacteria, so it would need to be removed and sanitized more frequently.

Sands: There are many types of sand that can be used and some are better than others. Any type of sand that use must be sifted to remove any clumps. It also needs to be washed to remove any dust, and baked to kill any pathogens. It should also not be used for dragons that are less than 10" since it can still cause impaction. It is easy to spot clean with a small plastic cup. The waste should be removed with some of the surrounding sand which has absorbed the excess moisture. If you use sand it should be completely removed and replaced or sifted, washed, & baked every 2-3 months. There are also many "reptile" sands available. There are some sands that contain calcium and some that contain vitamins, and they tend to be much more expensive than play sand. Additionally these are made so that bearded dragons like the taste and will eat it if their diet is lacking the proper calcium or vitamins that they need. We have used the calcium sands and have noticed that it clumps more readily and so there is the possibility of causing impaction. This can be diminished by meticulous spot cleaning & more frequent replacement or thorough cleanings. If you chose to use the sands that contain vitamins use caution. Vitamin sand also tends to clump more readily than play sand, but it is also important to know what vitamins it contains since some of the vitamins are harmful and may be toxic at high levels. If your dragon has an unlimited supply of the vitamins in the sand you will have no way to tell how much they are ingesting and they may slowly poison themselves. Some people also mix the sand with soil or moss to help it retain moisture and make it easier to dig. We only use this mixture temporarily for gravid females who are ready to lay their eggs. If it is used all the time it is difficult to clean and is a choice breeding ground for fungus, mold, & bacteria which can cause many health issues. Any mixture needs to be washed, sifted, & baked more frequently than sand alone. You also need to make sure that the soil or moss does not contain any fertilizers or insecticides that could harm your dragon, even some "organic" substances can harm your dragon.

Corn cob: In our opinion this is one of the worst choices for a substrate for bearded dragons. It has large easily ingestible particles that bearded dragons are unable to digest, so can easily cause impaction and possibly extensive medical bills or even the death of your dragon.

Crushed walnut shells: In our opinion this is another bad substrate to use for bearded dragons, and is sold under many different brand names. It also has large indigestible particles and it also has sharp edges so it can easily harm or kill your dragon. There are documented cases of bearded dragon deaths from crushed walnut shells.

Barks, fibers, and wood shavings: Bearded dragons have very short digestive tracts so even if a product is labeled as "digestible", it may not be the case for bearded dragons, and we suggest avoiding them at all costs. They may be marketed under

South Texas Dragons FAQ 12/22/12

many different names, and many are appropriate for other types of reptiles. They may be made out of different types of bark, wood shavings, or fibers. The one thing they all have in common is that they may cause impaction, and some of them also contain substances that are toxic to bearded dragons. For more information on substrates please check out our detailed care sheet.

Water

Question: Do Bearded Dragons like water?

Answer: Most bearded dragons like to be misted and also like to take a bath. They frequently lick the drops from misting and can absorb water through their vents which help them from becoming dehydrated. They can be bathed in a sink, bathtub, or plastic container. Whatever you use it must be thoroughly cleaned before and after the bath to avoid contamination from germs or exposure to toxic chemicals. The water should be around 100F°, and should not be deeper than the height of their shoulder. They may drink out of the tub, and if they defecate in the water they should be removed, the container cleaned and sanitized before continuing their bath. They should not be bathed within 1 hour of lights out to allow them to warm up their core temperature before the heat goes off for the night. If the water is too deep, the dragon may inhale some water, and may be identified by your dragon gasping. Frequent inhalation of water can lead to a respiratory infection.

Question: Why won't my dragon drink out of a dish?

Answer: Many dragons will not drink out of a dish or from their bath water and will only drink when misted. They should be misted at least once daily and will generally tip their heads and lick the drops coming off of their heads. It may be necessary to mist them and wait 15-20 seconds until they recognize it as a source of water. They should start to lick the drops from their heads, or from the enclosure walls. Then you can continue misting them. Avoid misting them more than 2-3 times each day and also avoid misting them within 1 hour of when the heat lights go off. This can prevent them from raising their core temperature sufficiently for proper digestion. Dragons that are shedding should be misted 1-2 times each day to avoid incomplete sheds. They should also be bathed weekly and may drink from their bath water.

Question: I have been using just plain tap water to mist the greenery in her cage twice a day and she'll lick up the drops as they fall. Should I use a reptile water conditioner additive?

Answer: We suggest avoiding bottled water. Since it is not considered a "food" or a "supplement" there are very few regulations about how pure it has to be. It could be straight out of the stream and into a bottle. If you have a home water conditioner or city water then you know that most of the bad stuff is removed. If you are using well water, it would be best to boil it before using it on your dragon. It should not be necessary to use any reptile water conditioners if the water is clean and their diet & supplements are appropriate.

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