

YOUR FREE READER'S COMPANION

The Bearded Dragon Setup Pack

A companion to The Bearded Dragon Care Bible · by Travis Penn

Thanks for picking up the book. This is the companion you tape to the side of the tank and the one you carry to the pet store before you spend a dime: the enclosure-size chooser that matches the tank to your dragon's age, the heat-and-UVB quick reference that prevents the two killers I see most, a feeder and calcium schedule by age so you stop guessing what to dust and when, a safe-versus-unsafe foods list to pin inside a cabinet, and a daily-weekly-monthly husbandry checklist with the warning signs that mean call a vet today. Print it, keep it by the tank. Right heat, right light, right food - that is a healthy dragon.

The dragons that arrive at a rescue broken almost never got there by bad luck. They failed from three quiet things: wrong heat, no real UVB, and no calcium. Get those three right and you've prevented almost everything a beginner fears. - Travis

1. The Enclosure-Size Chooser

A bearded dragon needs room to build a temperature gradient - hot at one end, cool at the other - and a baby in a giant bare tank can struggle to find its food and heat. So you match the enclosure to the age, and if you can swing it, you buy the big one once and set it up baby-friendly. Bigger is always better for a dragon; the gear is the expense, not the lizard.

Age / size	Bare minimum	Recommended	Why
Hatchling (0-2 mo, under ~6 in / 15 cm)	20 gal (76 L)	40 gal (151 L), simplified layout	Keep food and heat easy to find; contain feeding
Juvenile (2-6 mo, ~6-12 in / 15-30 cm)	40 gal (151 L)	75-120 gal (284-454 L)	Growing fast; room supports activity
Subadult (6-12 mo, ~12-18 in / 30-46 cm)	75 gal (284 L)	120 gal (454 L)	Move toward the full adult setup now
Adult (12+ mo, ~18-24 in / 46-61 cm)	40 gal (151 L) absolute floor	120 gal / 4x2x2 ft (454 L)	This is home for a decade - go big

Read this before you buy

- Buy the 120 gallon once. If money allows, skip the in-between sizes. Set the big enclosure up baby-friendly at first and let the dragon grow into it. You save money and hassle and give the animal the best home from day one.
- Front-opening beats top-opening. A hand coming down from above reads as a hawk to a desert lizard. Reaching in from the front, at the dragon's level, tames them faster. It's the main reason I steer people to PVC or sealed wood over a glass aquarium.
- PVC is my top pick for holding heat; sealed wood/melamine is great too; plain glass loses heat and usually opens from the top.
- The 40 gallon is a floor, not a goal. It is the smallest a healthy adult should ever live in, not the target.

The "babies need a small tank" idea is a myth. A baby does fine in a big enclosure as long as you keep the layout simple and the feeding contained. What a baby can't recover from is no UVB. Spend on the light before you spend on a bigger box.

2. Heat + UVB Quick Reference

This is the page that prevents two of the three quiet killers. Heat runs the gut - a cold dragon literally cannot digest its food. UVB lets the dragon make the vitamin D3 it needs to use calcium, and a missing or dead UVB tube is the number-one cause of metabolic bone disease. Measure both. Don't guess, and never trust the round stick-on dial thermometers that come in starter kits - peel them off and throw them out.

Basking temps by age (surface temp, read with an IR temp gun)

Zone	Baby / juvenile	Adult	How to measure
Basking surface	105-110 F (41-43 C)	95-105 F (35-41 C)	IR temp gun on the actual basking rock/branch
Warm-side air	90-100 F (32-38 C)	85-95 F (29-35 C)	Digital probe at the warm end
Cool side	80-85 F (27-29 C)	75-85 F (24-29 C)	Digital probe at the cool end
Nighttime (all ages)	no lower than ~65 F (18 C)	no lower than ~65 F (18 C)	Probe overnight; add a ceramic emitter only if your room drops below 65 F

- Daytime heat = white halogen or incandescent flood bulb. It gives heat AND bright light, which a day-active desert lizard needs. Never use a ceramic heat emitter for daytime (heat with no light), and skip colored red/blue "night bulbs."
- Run a thermostat on your heat as cheap insurance against a hot day cooking the dragon, but still verify with your probe and gun.
- Babies run warmer at the basking spot because they grow and digest hard; ease the temperature down toward the adult range as the dragon matures.

UVB quick reference - the bulb that prevents MBD

What	The right answer
Bulb type	Linear T5 HO fluorescent tube - Arcadia or Reptisun (Zoo Med). NOT a coil/compact "twist" bulb, NOT an LED, NOT "full spectrum"
Strength	10-12% ("desert" / 12% Arcadia, 10.0 Reptisun T5 HO) - the 5-6% "forest" tubes are too weak
Coverage	Span half to two-thirds of the tank, mounted on the warm side over the basking spot
Distance	Basking surface ~10-14 in (25-35 cm) below the tube - but always follow the chart on YOUR bulb's box
Mesh	A screen lid blocks 30-40% of UVB - mount below the mesh, or keep the basking surface a touch closer
Replace	Every 6-12 months even though it still glows (sooner for Reptisun) - write the install date on the tube
Hours	10-12 hours a day on a timer, off at night

The trap that gets careful keepers: a UVB tube fades long before it burns out. The visible light shines for years, but the UVB is gone or nearly gone well before the tube ever stops glowing. You can't see UVB, so put it on a calendar. A bright-looking tube can be producing almost nothing.

3. Feeder & Calcium/D3 Schedule by Age

Babies are protein machines that need a lot of insects; adults flip to mostly greens. And every bug needs the right prep: gut-load the feeder (feed it greens/squash for 24-48 hours first), then dust it with calcium right before feeding. Two different jobs - you do both. The one rule that prevents impaction: never feed an insect wider than the space between your dragon's eyes. When in doubt, go smaller.

Feeding frequency by age

Age	Insect feedings	Roughly how much	Greens
Baby (0 to ~5 mo)	2-3 times daily	All eaten in 10-15 min, then remove leftovers	Always available (mostly ignored at first)
Juvenile (~5-12 mo)	1-2 times daily	A modest portion each feeding	A growing share of the diet
Sub-adult (~12-18 mo)	Once daily, tapering	Smaller portions	Becoming the main food
Adult (18+ mo)	2-4 times per week	A small handful per insect day	Daily - the bulk of the diet

Staple feeders vs treats vs avoid

Feeder	Role	Notes
Dubia roaches	Staple	Best overall - high protein, low chitin, easy to keep
Crickets	Staple	Nutritious and cheap; smelly and escape-prone
Black soldier fly larvae (Calci-worms)	Staple	Naturally high in calcium
Hornworms	Treat	High moisture, good for hydration; watch the size rule
Superworms	Treat	Fatty; adults only, for weight gain or enrichment
Mealworms	Avoid as staple	High chitin, impaction risk, low nutrition

Never feed wild-caught bugs (pesticides/parasites) and never fireflies - they're toxic and can kill with one bug.

Calcium / D3 / multivitamin dusting by age (assuming proper UVB)

Age	Calcium (plain, no D3)	Multivitamin
Baby (0 to ~5 mo)	Dust nearly every feeding, most days	About twice a week
Juvenile (~5-12 mo)	Most feedings, ~4-5 days a week	About twice a week
Sub-adult (~12-18 mo)	A few times a week	About twice a week
Adult (18+ mo)	A couple of times a week	Once or twice a week

Which calcium? If you have a proper, correctly mounted, not-expired T5 HO UVB tube, dust with plain calcium (no D3) - the light makes the D3, and a multivitamin gives a small backup dose a couple of times a week. Only lean on calcium WITH D3 if your UVB is weak, coil, or expired - and treat that as a patch while you fix the light. The rule that keeps you safe at both ends: one main source of D3, not three. Too little D3 causes MBD; too much (strong UVB + with-D3 calcium + heavy D3 multivitamin all at once) is also harmful, because D3 is fat-soluble and builds up.

4. Safe vs Unsafe Foods

Build an adult's salad on staple greens with a good calcium-to-phosphorus balance, add a little veg, and treat fruit like candy. Wash everything under cold running water, even bagged "pre-washed" greens, and chop smaller than you think. This is the list to read twice and pin inside a cabinet door.

Feed often (staples)	Feed sometimes	Treat / rarely	NEVER
Collard greens	Squash (grated)	Blueberries	Avocado (toxic)
Mustard greens	Bell pepper	Raspberries	Rhubarb (toxic)
Dandelion greens	Green beans	Mango, papaya	Onion, garlic, chives, leeks
Turnip greens	Snap peas, okra	Figs	Fireflies (kills dragons)
Escarole	Cactus pad, parsnip	Apple/pear (peeled)	Iceberg lettuce (empty filler)

Use only rarely, tiny amounts (high oxalates that bind calcium): spinach, beet greens, Swiss chard. A little once in a long while is fine; never make them a staple.

Fruit is dessert, maybe once a week as a topper. Iceberg lettuce is crunchy water with almost no nutrition and can cause loose stool - a salad of iceberg is no salad at all. For a grown dragon, "right food" is mostly what is green in that bowl, and you really can't overfeed a dragon on leafy greens the way you can with bugs or fruit.

5. Husbandry Checklist + "Vet Now" Signs

Tape this to the tank. Most of what goes wrong with a beardedie, you prevent by doing these small things on schedule. Fix husbandry first when something looks off - but for the serious signs at the bottom, you fix husbandry on the way to the vet, not instead of it.

Every day

- ☐ Check basking surface temp with the IR gun (10 seconds - catches a burned-out bulb or a heat wave)
- ☐ Confirm UVB tube is on and positioned over the basking spot
- ☐ Fresh salad in the cool-side dish; pull yesterday's wilted greens
- ☐ Feed sized, gut-loaded, dusted insects per the age schedule (on a warm dragon)
- ☐ Fresh water, dish cleaned
- ☐ Spot-clean any droppings; eyeball the dragon - alert, bright-eyed, standing tall?
- ☐ Confirm a poop happened (or note the day it didn't)

Every week

- ☐ Wash food and water dishes thoroughly
- ☐ Wipe down glass/walls and basking surface
- ☐ Verify the gradient: warm side and cool side both reading in range
- ☐ Check the dragon's body - full tail base, no fat rolls, no swelling or limp

Every month / as scheduled

- ☐ Deep-clean the enclosure and decor
- ☐ Weigh the dragon (grams) and log it - steady or growing, not dropping
- ☐ Check the UVB calendar - is the tube due for replacement (6-12 mo)?
- ☐ Restock calcium, multivitamin, and feeders before you run out
- ☐ Yearly: a fecal check at the exotics vet - cheap insurance against parasites

Get to an exotics or reptile vet NOW if you see...

- ☐ Soft rubbery jaw, bowed/bent legs, tremors (MBD - fix UVB + calcium on the way)
- ☐ No poop + bloated belly + dragging back legs (impaction)
- ☐ Tissue protruding from the vent (prolapse - keep it moist, go immediately)
- ☐ Open-mouth breathing, mucus or bubbles at the nose, wheezing/clicking (respiratory infection)
- ☐ Runny, bloody, or foul stool with weight loss (parasites/coccidia - bring a fresh stool sample)
- ☐ Swollen mouth, cheesy gray material, drooling (mouth rot)
- ☐ Crusty yellow/brown skin patches that spread (yellow fungus - isolate and go urgently)
- ☐ Can't stand, limp, unable to right itself, seizures
- ☐ Sudden refusal to eat + rapid weight loss or sunken eyes
- ☐ A fracture, a limb at a wrong angle, a burn, or a deep wound

A regular cat-and-dog clinic usually can't help a dragon. Find your reptile vet before you need one, not during the emergency - that phone number is the most important thing in your first-aid kit.

That's the pack. The one habit worth more than any decor in the tank: get the three pillars right before you worry about anything else - a measured basking temp, a real T5 HO UVB tube replaced on a calendar, and a pinch of calcium on the bugs. Do that and you've taken the two big killers, MBD and impaction, almost entirely off the table. When you've got your dragon basking bright-eyed on its warm rock, I'd love to hear about it, and in a couple of emails I'll tell you how a quick word from you helps this book reach the next new keeper standing in front of an intimidating glass tank.

Right heat, right light, right food,

Travis Penn