**Beardie Basics:**

Bearded Dragons are naturally from Australia. The average dragon grows to about one foot in length, and lives an average of 10 years in captivity, though we have had some live for as long as 13 years. When in captivity there are a lot of important elements we need to provide them with so they can live full, healthy, happy lives.

*Habitat*: Dragon hatchlings can stay in 10 gallon tanks for a short time. Their habitat should grow as they do. Adult dragons can live in 40 gallon tanks, though bigger is better. They need places to hide in such as caves or fake plants. They need branches to climb on, and a place to cool down.

*Food*: Dragons are omnivores which means they need plants and insects. Hatchlings need to eat mostly insects with small amounts of plants, while adults need to eat mostly plants with small amounts of insects. A good feeding guideline is to feed the dragon a pile of greens the size of their trunk (their body without head and tail). Drop worms on top. For hatchlings they can eat as many insects as they want. As Adults they should be fed 5-10 worms depending on size and frequency of meals.

*Plants*: Dark Leafy greens should make up the majority of the plant part of the diet. Lettuces like iceberg and romaine are not good for reptiles. They have enzymes that slow down the digestion and make it hard for their bodies to absorb the proper nutrients from their future meals. Collard greens, Mustard greens, Dandelion greens, and kale are good food choices. Spinach should be used sparingly because it is high in oxalic acid which can build up in reptiles systems and prevent calcium absorption. Dragons do not eat a lot of fruit in the wild, so their bodies are not adjusted to process large amounts. Fruit should be fed once a week at the most as a treat, not a staple.

*Insects:* Whenever possible dragons should be fed a variety of insects. Insects should not be wild caught as you cannot guarantee they have not been affected by parasites or toxins in the natural environment. Crickets, Super Worms, Roaches, and Soldier Fly Larvae are all good choices for the primary protein source. Meal worms should only be fed in a pinch when other foods are not available. The exoskeleton on a mealworm is so thick that the dragon expends too much effort digesting it and loses the value of the small amount of protein found in that worm. Superworms have high protein and thin exoskeleton making them the best food choice when possible. They are scientifically called Zophobas Worms, though some stores will call them King Meal Worms. They are black and brown. If the worm is only brown, then it is a meal worm and should be fed sparingly. The insects should be fed for a couple days before feeding them to your dragon. They need to be filled with healthy foods to make them healthy for your lizard. Placing them in a container with a carrot and some fish flakes, dried crunched up cat food, or a commercial purchased cricket food will keep them healthy for your pet.

*Water:*  Dragons do not drink from water bowls in the wild, so getting them to use one in captivity can be tricky. Water is important to a dragon’s health, so a large shallow dish of water should be provided at all times. If they cannot see over the edge of the dish, they are not likely to climb into it looking for water. A dish that they can accidentally walk into is the best. A dripper can be placed above the cage above the water dish allowing the water to drip into the dish one drop at a time. This natural drip will stimulate the dragon to drink. Make sure to measure out the amount of water using the dish it will drip into to avoid overflowing and creating a messy habitat. Bearded Dragons should be soaked in a container with shallow room temperature water for 15-30 minutes twice a week. This assures that they will stay hydrated. Even if you do not see them drinking, dragons can take in water through their vents. This is not something all reptiles can do.

*Supplements:* Reptiles need calcium for proper growth and bone health. Powdered calcium can be purchased at most pet stores, and is absolutely necessary for them to maintain their health. Sprinkle small amounts of calcium powder on the dragon’s food twice a week.

*Lighting:* In the wild dragons spend 10 plus hours a day in the sun. The UV rays from the sun make it possible for the dragons to metabolize calcium. In captivity they need 12 hours of artificial sunlight. A special UVB producing bulb must be placed over the enclosure for 12 hours a day. These bulbs can be purchased on line or in a pet store. The light will last a long time, but the UV strength diminishes so it is important to look at the replacement timeframe for the bulb you end up choosing Write the date on the tank somewhere so you do not forget to change it. Lack of UV will cause MBD (Metabolic Bone Disease) which can cause painful bending and breaking of bones. This is one of the most important things you need to do for your dragon.

*Heat:* Bearded Dragons need to be able to thermo regulate (control their body temperature). They cannot produce their own heat so they must be able to get it through an outside source. This can be achieved through many methods. A heat lamp, a ceramic heat emitter (produces heat without light), or a heat pad can be used to provide the necessary warmth. They must have a spot where they can get up to 95 degrees. They must also have a cool place in the tank to lower their body temperature as needed. Place the heat on one side and make sure the tank is big enough to allow for a good temperature gradient.

*Substrate:* The floor of the tank should be covered with something that will allow the dragon to move easily and will help you keep the tank clean. Paper grocery bags are great because they absorb liquid without falling apart. Newspaper is okay but can get messy. Reptile carpet can be used as well. Avoid loose substrates because the dragon is likely to ingest the substrate while eating. This will eventually lead to problems. Sand is particularly bad for dragons. Stores will try to sell you calci-sand. This is still bad. It is non-soluble calcium so it will still block their systems causing serious medical problems down the road.

*Cohabitation:* Bearded Dragons can only be housed together if they are female. Males will attack each other injuring each other. Housing a male with a female is not recommended either. Males are very aggressive when mating and will injure the females over time.

Please feel free to reach out to Creepy Critters Rescue at any time with any concerns or questions.