



DO YOU NEED A HELPING HAND OR ADVICE?

Email your queries to prk.ed@kelsey.co.uk or write to the address on page 66. A selection of submitted questions will appear here every month, and a prize of Vetark products will be awarded to the writer of the Star Question. Regrettably, replies can only be given through this column, and if you are worried about the health of your animal, seek veterinary advice without delay.



Why has my bearded dragon gone off its food?

There are a number of reasons as to why bearded dragons go off their food.

It can be related to the time of year, and whether they are about to enter a period of brumation - a natural process where their metabolism slows for a period. Nevertheless, it is a worrying time, as there is always a likelihood of a more sinister cause in the background. It's not something to be ignored, and this is where the advice of a vet who is used to dealing regularly with reptiles can be invaluable.

Parasites

The presence of parasites is often put forward as the most likely cause, and certainly, as in all reptiles, a heavy burden will indeed result in a loss of appetite. If the symptoms persist for more than a few days, then a faecal test can be advisable. This can be organised through your vet, or with PALS (Pinmoore Animal Laboratory Services Ltd). They will provide you with a report which you can take to your vet and obtain treatment as required. You can find full details online at their website at <http://www.palsvetlab.co.uk>

Oral medication is likely to be prescribed, and this can depress the bearded dragon's appetite for a time as well. I always like to provide a pro- and pre-biotic alongside the medication which will eliminate the parasites. These can help to settle the beneficial bacteria in the gut, ensuring that everything stays in balance. I use Avi-Pro Plus and Reptoboost for this job, and this can help to rekindle your pet's appetite quickly afterwards.

It is also worthwhile thoroughly disinfecting your lizard's quarters, so as to minimise the possible risk of reinfection. Strip the vivarium down completely, and use a suitable reptile-safe disinfectant for this purpose, as well as discarding the substrate, where droppings will have been deposited.

Other infections

These are not as frequently encountered as parasites, but a range of bacterial, viral and fungal infections can afflict beardies, and one of the most obvious symptoms can again be a loss of appetite.

Your vet will be able to advise in such cases, and provide appropriate treatment, but just as with parasites, the use of probiotics may be recommended, as well as thoroughly disinfecting the vivarium after the course of treatment has been finished of course.

Loss of appetite



Being kept at a sub-optimal temperature will affect a bearded dragon's behaviour directly, and makes it more vulnerable to illness as well. Photo courtesy spetenfia/www.shutterstock.com

Management issues

Reptiles are so dependent on their environment for their well-being, and what can easily happen is that if there is an issue surrounding their management, then this will impact on their level of activity, and cause them to lose their appetite. As a starting point therefore, always run through the following list of points, just in case there is something that you have missed, which could account for the problem and can be easily corrected.

Incorrect/inadequate heat and/or UVB levels

Both of these are absolutely vital considerations, with reptiles depending on the warmth of their surroundings to fuel their activity, and the beneficial UVA and UVB wavelengths of light serving as an appetite stimulant and ensuring healthy calcium metabolism in the body respectively.

Check that basking temperature. Don't worry about ambient temperature and the cool end initially. Use an infrared thermometer for an instant reading - these are such useful pieces of equipment, which deserve to be more widely used in the hobby. Check that the basking temperature is within the optimal range, which I always recommend should be between 38-42°C (100-107°F). You can then follow up checking in the

other areas of the enclosure.

Make sure the UV light that you are providing is in the form of a tube. The coil bulbs are woefully inadequate in terms of the coverage they offer, and the exposure levels for bearded dragons in my view. I wouldn't bother with these in a beardie's vivarium. Also, stick exclusively to the top brands in this field. I regard these as being Arcadia 12% (or 14% if you have a 60cm/2ft high vivarium) and ZooMed ReptiSun 10.0. Always use the tube with a reflector too, that concentrates the light, reflecting it downwards into the lizard's quarters. You must make sure these are used at the manufacturer's recommended distances. The distance that is stated means from the tube itself down to the dragon's back.

And there's one more really important thing too. Make sure the UV light is never filtered through mesh if possible. Bear in mind that this will reduce the projected output within the vivarium or tank by approximately half. This means that the remaining UV output will be suboptimal. Both exposure to inadequate UV and low temperature will impact on your bearded dragon's behaviour patterns.

There is a difference though, in that a low temperature is likely to have an instant impact, whereas sub-optimal UV exposure has a more insidious effect, which will not be so immediately

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Variety in a bearded dragon's diet is essential.
Photo courtesy David C Azor/
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obvious. Also, what you need to bear in mind is when you last changed the UV source. The beneficial UV output declines over time, and typically, these tubes will need replacing every 10-12 months, depending on the manufacturer's guidance.

If you register when you acquired your lamp, some will send you an email automatically when it will need to be changed. But it is vital to note the date yourself otherwise, because the output will decline to an inadequate level, although the tube itself continues to work and you won't be able to spot the difference.

Incorrect diet

Feeding an improper diet to your bearded dragon in the first place is not going to do any good at all. Variety in its diet is vital, and relying on just one or two types of bug will not provide a nutritionally

balanced diet, leading on to progressive problems unless this situation is rapidly corrected.

Remember that bearded dragons are opportunistic hunters by nature, so they would pretty much eat anything they could see and catch within reason in the wild. Even in the more barren areas of Central Australia, there will still be a wider variety of prey for them than we can offer to them in vivarium surroundings.

The nutritional value of the bugs is also important. Fatty foods will have a negative effect over time. So that means offerings of waxworms and morios (giant mealworms) should be kept to a minimum, ideally being used only as the occasional treat every week or so. Otherwise, you can encounter the unfortunate situation where your beardie may largely refuse to eat anything except these live foods, and rapidly becomes obese if this feeding preference is indulged.

Gut-loading and supplements

As discussed elsewhere in this issue, gut-loading is very important to boost the nutritional value of bugs significantly, but it is worth bearing in mind that it can change the taste of them as well. It can be a good idea not to rely on just one gut-loading food, but to vary these too, and don't be tempted to economise. The more expensive brands often seem to be more palatable to the lizards, as well as to the bugs themselves. By offering different tastes, so your dragon is less likely to become fussy about food.

It's not all about bugs anyway, as bearded dragons, particularly as they become older, will prove to be more herbivorous. This offers the opportunity to provide other supplements, particularly focusing as ever on the crucial calcium:phosphorus ratio, to ensure that your bearded dragon has a healthy skeletal structure, and is not at risk from metabolic bone disease (MBD), which causes general bodily weakness, and makes eating difficult.

Yet if you are sprinkling a supplement on plant matter, this is probably the first thing that your bearded dragon's taste buds will pick up, even before that of the food itself. What many owners don't realise is that the taste of a supplement can vary and alter, and this alone can be a reason for a bearded dragon becoming disinclined to eat. Over the years, I've done my own experiments with this aspect of reptile care. And the conclusion was that replacing supplements around every six months can be beneficial. It is better to buy smaller tubs, because once they are open, the contents will start to deteriorate in any case.

Pete Hawkins

Dangers of recycling



Can I use the left-over greenstuff from my bearded dragons to feed my live food?

This is a widespread practice, but it honestly isn't to be recommended. Just offer your dragons what they are likely to eat, and give fresh greenstuff to your bugs. Recycling otherwise can be disastrous, because of the

potential for the spread of illness and parasites through your collection. If you have a reptile with a parasitic burden, which may not become apparent for some time, you can easily manage to spread the parasites through the collection as a result. The situation could be even more dire if one of your dragons is affected by adenovirus, bearing in mind that a beardie that is already sick is more likely to leave its food.

It only takes a moment for a reptile to walk through faeces and then over its food in a bowl, or chew on some food for the potential transfer of infective microbes on to those greens. And then by placing the uneaten, contaminated greens back in with the live food for them to eat is starting the cycle all over again. In short, please don't do it - it's not worth the risk!

Pete Hawkins



Left-overs are dangerous! Photo courtesy PHOTO FUN /www.shutterstock.com

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