



CAPITAL DRAGONS

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**Canada's source for extreme
bearded dragon colour morphs.**

A little about Crickets

Crickets have been the staple in the diets of insectivorous lizards for decades. They are fairly nutritious, readily eaten by most lizards, fairly easy to keep, and you can house a thousand of them in a relatively small space. There are a few things to take into consideration if you are not already keeping a large number of crickets at home.

1. They are noisy. If you find the constant chirping of adults to be annoying, then you had better find an out of the way place in the house to keep them. I don't particularly notice the chirping myself, but some people, especially those not from rural areas; find the noise to be very distracting.
2. They smell to an extent, and if allowed to, the odor can be quite offensive. I have found that two things contribute the most to cricket odor - dampness and death. Keep your cricket colony dry and this will go very far to minimizing the odor. Accomplish this with adequate ventilation, and watching how you offer moisture to the crickets. Keep the colony warm and well fed and you will reduce the death rate considerably.
3. Another problem is escapes. Crickets will escape into the house, this is just inevitable. During the warmer months of the year, there is hardly a day goes by that we don't catch a cricket or two in the house. I also have a small dog that enjoys stalking this elusive "prey".

To Breed or to Buy

The answer to this question depends on your needs and your own interest. If you only have a gecko or two for instance, you can get by reasonably well by just buying a few crickets at the pet store. If you have several lizards though, particularly those with large appetites such as bearded dragons or small monitors, then you will soon find you have an enormous bill for crickets if you try to buy them retail.

When this is the case, you can either buy them in bulk or try your hand at raising your own. Crickets can be purchased for as little as \$11.00 per thousand depending on supplier and quantity. I usually try to raise a few crickets during the warmer months to feed the hatchling lizards, but I decided I would rather buy the vast majority of crickets I use rather than fool with breeding them. The choice is up to you.

Ordering a thousand to begin with is still a good idea even if you are intending on breeding your own. This will give you a huge group right off the bat to start your breeding. When ordering crickets, I normally order one size below full adult. This will ensure you get the maximum life out of your larger crickets. Some cricket suppliers size their crickets by age, and some do it by length. A 1" cricket or a 6 week old cricket is considered full adult.

Setting up your Colony

I house my crickets in large rubber maid tubs. These are far easier to handle during cleaning than glass or wood boxes. Many people also use large deep trash cans for their crickets so they do not have to use a lid. A ring of slick packing tape 3/4 of the way up the can will suffice to keep the crickets from scaling the sides.

To use the tubs, I cut the center out of the lid. Into this hole I attach aluminum window screening with a hot glue gun. Make sure you use aluminum screening and not the nylon screening. The crickets will chew their way through the nylon mesh in a fairly short time. Inside the box you will need a food dish, some egg carton flats for standing room, and if desired an inverted jar style water dispenser. I choose to provide water by means of leafy greens.

I mist the greens with a fine spray before placing them in the cricket tub and they get the necessary water this way. When doing this though, be sure not to forget, or they will devour the greens and be left with no water source. This will result in the crickets killing each other or moisture. A jar lid with a piece of sponge cut to fit will also provide water, but any time a method such as this is used, the crickets will lay eggs in the sponge. The sponge will also have to be cleaned or replaced regularly or it will become fouled with eggs and fecal matter. Lean the egg flats vertically inside the tub to create the most surface area, and to keep the flats from settling into each other. I use no substrate at all in the cricket boxes. I feed my cricket's chicken laying mash, available in any feed store, and in my area the local supermarket. I don't take any special concern to gut load my crickets. Accomplishing this to any extent with a tub of 1000 is extremely difficult. I feel their standard fare of laying mash and greens is fairly nutritious, and I dust them with various supplements before feeding.

Breeding

Once your crickets start chirping, they are ready to breed. The best method of harvesting eggs from your colony is to use a removable egg laying container.

I use any type of container that is 1-3 inches deep. The egg laying medium can be many things, but I prefer loose soil or peat. Some people have had fine results using vermiculite, but I had problems with egg desiccation using this medium.

Fill the laying container with the dampened medium and place the box inside the cricket tub. In 48 hours there will be thousands of eggs in the soil. They look like very tiny grains of rice. The egg container can be removed at this time or left for a few more days if kept moist. I usually change out the boxes every 2 days to limit the disturbance of the eggs by the other crickets.

Incubating the Eggs

When you remove the laying box, put the lid on it and place it where it will stay warm. The eggs will hatch in 7-14 days, and will need to be kept damp during this time. If the eggs are allowed to dry out they will not recover. After the first week, check on your laying boxes daily and you will soon see the surface of the soil literally moving with very tiny crickets. At this time, place the entire container inside a rearing box set up similar to the breeding box and the nymphs will leave the nest box on their own. I have found it best not to completely remove the lid from the nesting box, but to instead just set it loosely on top. There are probably still eggs that need to hatch left in the soil, and removing the lid will allow the soil to dry out and can cause droplets of water to condense inside the rearing container which will easily drown the babies by the hundreds.

Rearing the Crickets

The actual rearing of the babies can be the most difficult step in the process. It is important to keep the rearing box warm, and to provide a humid area for the babies.

The first 72 hours of life is the most critical. This is when they will undergo their first molt. To ensure they get through this molt easily I like to put a crumpled slightly damp piece of paper towel in the cage. The crickets will congregate in and around this paper towel and inside the laying containers. Doing this has significantly reduced the mortality rate of my hatchling crickets.

Keeping the colony going

You will need to reserve a portion of the offspring as future breeders in order to keep the colony going. The lifespan of a cricket is only a few weeks, and the females normally die after laying their batch of eggs.

I have raised crickets to the second generation, but determined I would rather just buy large crickets and feed all the hatchlings off to baby lizards during the breeding season. This compromise helps establish a constant supply of small crickets for the hatchling lizards and offset the cost of breeding them without requiring very much attention on my part to ensure I keep a viable colony going.