

GARTER SNAKES

As the weather gets warmer, the well-known garter snakes leave their underground dens and start searching for food and mates. They have been hibernating for the past 8 months and soon we will see them sunning themselves on rocks, ledges and woodpiles. Garter snakes come in a wide variety of colors, enabling them to blend in with their background. The common garter snake ranges in size from about 4 inches at birth to an adult size of approximately 2 feet. Their expected life span in the wild is about 2 years with their main predators being raccoons, crows, hawks, eagles and other birds. Besides residential areas, garter snakes can be found near pond and stream edges, wetlands, forests and rocky hillsides. Garter snakes are harmless; however, if you want to exclude snakes from your yard remove any potential shelter like debris, woodpiles, tall grass, almost anything close to the ground that they can enter or get beneath to avoid predators and extreme temperatures. Since garter snakes only burrow in loose soil, some hiding places may be eliminated by packing sharp gravel and caulking around stoops and slabs. Should a snake get into a small confined area such as a crevice behind the front steps moth balls may temporarily drive them out so that the entrance can be sealed.

Garter snakes move through their territory looking for prey during the cooler parts of the day – early morning, late afternoon and early evening. Many people fear garter snakes and kill them without realizing that they are not only harmless, but beneficial to the gardener. There is no more reason to kill a garter snake than to kill a song bird. Garter snakes are nonpoisonous. They eat insects, as well as frogs, worms, grubs and even slugs. Some of the larger garter snakes are efficient mousetraps and will kill a variety of rodent pests. While snakes will not eliminate pests, they help keep their numbers in check. When approached, garters will try to take cover. If unable to flee they will coil to make themselves appear larger. If grabbed, garter snakes defecate and release noxious, musky chemicals to discourage predators; however, they will never offensively attack people or pets.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.
