

Garter Snakes – A Gardener's Ally in the War Against Slugs

Found any slithering snakes in your garden lately? Unfortunately, most people are frightened by snakes, and wish they would depart posthaste. But wait... take time to become acquainted with these garden visitors and you may welcome them instead!

The most common type of snake found in urban/suburban gardens is the harmless garter snake. Three species are common in Western Washington: the western terrestrial garter snake, the common garter snake, and the northwestern garter snake. These species are similar looking (darker scales with stripes of lighter colors along their sides and back), and live similar lives. Garter snakes are reptiles – dependent upon outside elements to regulate their body temperature. This is why they are often found basking in warm places, such as the top of your compost heap.

Garter snakes grow up to 36" long (a few grow longer), shedding their skin several times a year. They hibernate in winter, typically underground, as they need warmth to survive. Females give birth to live young in the late summer or fall. Baby snakes are on their own after birth – seldom surviving into adulthood. Hawks, raccoons, coyotes, dogs, cats, and others prey upon garter snakes. Cars and lawnmowers kill many more. Their most common defense is flight, but they also excrete a foul-smelling substance when handled.

Garter snakes don't hear well, but have a keen sense of vibration detection and of temperature variations. Their eyesight is considered poor. They possess an excellent sense of taste/smell – using their ever-flicking tongue as a guide to find prey. Contrary to popular myth, snakeskin is not slimy like fish scales. Snakeskin is made of keratin – just like human fingernails!

The diet of garter snakes is quite broad. They dine on earthworms, slugs, snails, leeches, and small amphibians. Larger snakes will eat small mammals, such as mice. Most gardeners would prefer they had a frog-free diet, but garters make up for this slight indiscretion by eating lots of slugs!

So how do you attract slug-consuming garter snakes to dine in your garden?

- Provide shelter – an old piece of plywood or metal roofing panel left loosely on the ground in an out of the way place would do. Old stumps and large rocks also work well.
- Provide water sources – install a natural pool, or a ground-level birdbath.
- Limit chemical use in your garden.
- Walk your lawn before you mow to scare any resident snakes into hiding.

Hopefully a slithering garter snake will soon take up residence in your garden – a valuable ally in your war against slugs!