

Garter Snakes are Beneficial

Many of us tend to be fearful of all snakes and some just want them all dead. The vast majority of snakes in the foothills are very beneficial to gardeners. Garter snakes devour slugs and many other pests. Gopher snakes are especially helpful to gardeners and farmers. They prey on mice, rats, gophers, frogs, toads, salamanders, fish, slugs, earthworms, leeches and bird eggs. They hunt on land, in ponds and in slow-moving creeks and rivers.



Using radio tracking, scientists have found these large snakes holed up in gopher holes during the heat of summer. The large size and aggressive manner of gopher snakes sometimes cause people to mistake them for rattlesnakes. But gopher snakes are not venomous and they should be encouraged to patrol fields and gardens.

When something slithers out from under your cabbages, it is most likely a garter snake. The common garter is a fairly large snake. It can grow to about 52 inches long from head to tail. The common garter snake's scales come in a wide range of colors and patterns, but there usually is a yellowish or yellow-green stripe running down the backbone. Another yellowish stripe usually runs down each side, and most common garters have red spots on their sides.

The variation in colors and patterns depends on where the common garter snake lives. They have evolved to blend in with their environment, leading to different colors and patterns on their scales. All snakes locate prey by smell and sight. Snakes have an extraordinary sense of smell. When they stick out their forked tongue, they are "sniffing" for prey and predators. Contrary to popular belief, snakes also have good short-range vision, which helps them locate and strike prey.

Snakes swallow their prey whole. They are able to work their jaws around relatively large prey items, and their backward-facing teeth help push the food down their throat. Garter snakes generally breed in the spring. They don't lay eggs—they give birth to live young in the late summer or fall. In the late summer's heat, some snakes switch to nighttime activity and we rarely see them during the day. They search out cool, moist places, like your garden. There they slip into mulch piles or under boards. You might still catch a glimpse of them at night making the rounds in your vegetables.

The western rattlesnake, the only species of truly venomous snake native to the foothills, feeds on mice, rats and other smaller animals. Rattlesnakes are part of the natural environment, and as such, they should be respected. When you encounter one in its natural environment, away from homes and children, stay away and leave the snake alone. They are quite reclusive and rarely aggressive.

To protect beneficial snakes, walk the lawn before mowing it to scare the snakes into hiding. Lawn mowers are deadly to snakes because they do not hear noises the way humans do. Learn to identify the snakes, big and little; they are helping to keep pests in check around your garden. Too often, people identify snakes after they chop them in half. They find out too late they just killed one of their garden's best defenders.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact the Farm Advisor's office at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or 754-6477 with your agricultural questions. Talk to a certified Master Gardener every Wednesday, 10:00-12:00, 754-2880. To speak with a Master Gardener in Tuolumne County, please call 209 533-5696.