

GARTER SNAKE CARE SHEET

(*Genus Thamnophis*)

For generalized, background information on snake care and husbandry, please see the "General Snake Care Sheet" first

Garter snakes are an extremely wide ranging, hardy, and adaptable genus of snakes found throughout much of Canada, the United States, and into Mexico. There are numerous species and subspecies of garter snakes, most of which care for are similar. These familiar and active diurnal snakes are so named due to their dorsal and lateral stripes that resemble garter stockings. Garter snakes are quite possibly the widest ranging and most cold tolerant North American reptile, and occur in virtually every type of terrestrial to semi aquatic habitat, both natural and even suburban. Garter snakes will often congregate, and emerge in considerable numbers every spring and autumn, and often form massive breeding balls shortly after emergence that can often consist of several or even dozens of males attempting to mate with one female.

Garter Snake Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Family: Colubridae

Subfamily: Natricinae

Genus: Thamnophis

Commonly Kept Garter Snake Species:

Common Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis ssp.*): Is an extremely wide ranging and variable species, occurring over much of Canada, the United States, and into northern Mexico depending on the subspecies. Ground color can range anywhere from brown, to black, olive, or grayish often with a white to yellowish continuous dorsal stripe down the back (although this may be obscured or even absent in some subspecies and localities). Whitish to yellowish lateral stripes are often present (although they may also be obscured or even absent) such as in the **Maritime Garter snake** (*T. sirtalis pallidulus*), and usually cover scale rows 2 and 3. There may be dark vertical bars on the front third of the **Chicago Garter snake** (*T. sirtalis semifasciatus*). Red to orange flecking may be present in some subspecies such as the **Red Sided Gartersnake** (*T. sirtalis parietalis*) and sometimes **Eastern Gartersnake** (*T. sirtalis sirtalis*) or their may be dark spots or mottling in between stripes.

Butler's Garter Snake (*Thamnophis butleri*): A relatively small species of garter snake (15-20") occurring in the Southern Great Lakes region of the United States and Southern Canada that superficially may strongly resemble a typical Eastern Garter snake with a relatively small blunt head and thick indistinct neck. Lateral stripes usually cover scales rows 3 and 4. May hybridize with Plains Garter snakes, making positive identification even more difficult in some cases.

Plains Garter Snake (*Thamnophis radix*): A medium sized species of garter snake averaging 15 to 28". Ground color can be brown, olive, or black, with a deep yellow continuous dorsal stripe, and whitish to cream colored lateral scales. The lateral scales cover scale rows 3 and 4, and their

may be dark spots in between stripes. Widely ranging, and occurs from south central Canada, through the central and Great Lakes Region of the United States, and into northern Mexico.

Checkered Garter Snake (*Thamnophis marcianus*): This species occurs in the south central United States and northern Mexico, and can have a ground color of grayish, olive brown, to yellowish brown with a narrow yellowish, white, to cream colored dorsal stripe and somewhat indistinct lateral stripes. A pair of dark neck blotches is usually present. There is often a series of darker checkered pattern hence its common name.

Blackneck Garter Snake (*Thamnophis cyrtopsis*): This species occurs in the western and southwestern United States and northern Mexico. Ground color can range from black, chocolate brown, to olive brown, and the dorsal stripe may be whitish, yellowish, to reddish orange while lateral stripes are usually cream colored. The dorsal stripe may be vibrant orange in the most exceptional specimens. There are a pair of dark blotches on the neck, that may or may not be fused together, hence its common name.

*Overall Difficulty Level: Novice

Garter snakes are hardy snakes that have simple, straightforward care requirements, making them ideal first choices for the beginning reptile enthusiast provided they possess a general knowledge and understanding of reptile, specifically snake husbandry. Given the proper care, garter snakes can attain longevity of 10-15 years on average in captivity.

Size and Description

Neonate garter snakes typically range from five to eight inches in length. As adults, most species of garter snakes attain lengths anywhere between one and a half to four feet (18-48"). Garter snakes are a small to medium sized semi keeled colubrid that can exhibit a wide variation in coloration depending on the subspecies and locality. In general though, most garter snakes have one longitudinal dorsal stripe and two longitudinal lateral stripes on each side on a background color of black, brown, tawny brown, olive, or olive-gray. These stripes can be yellow, orangish, white, tan, or brown. Several garter species can be identified and distinguished from one another by which scale rows the lateral stripes cover. Some individuals or populations may have indistinct or even absent dorsal stripes. Many garter snakes have reddish orange, yellow, or black flecks in between the dorsal and lateral stripes. Some species can also be melanistic (black).

Many different designer color and pattern morphs of various species of garter snakes (especially Plains, Checkered, and Commons) are also beginning to emerge in captivity including Albinos, Erythristics, Flame phases, Hypos, Granites, Anerythristics, Axanthics, Snows, and High Red and Orange phases.

Temperament and Handling

Garter snakes, like many species of snake, are often initially more defensive as neonates or juveniles. Neonate garters, or garters that are not accustomed to handling will often gape, strike, flatten their bodies, and expel musk/and defecate. With gentle and patient handling, most garter snakes will become docile and accustomed to handling. Others however, may remain somewhat nervous and flighty. It should be kept in mind however that even a supposedly docile snake may bite or react defensively if suddenly startled or frightened or when food is detected (resulting in a feeding response bite).

Enclosure/Housing

The enclosure you choose must be secure to prevent the escape of the inhabitant and provide adequate ventilation. Neonate to juvenile garter snakes can be maintained in a 10-15 gallon long glass terrarium with a secure screen top. Larger numbers of hatchling to juvenile gartersnakes can be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriately sized plastic shoe box sized containers with holes punched or melted in for ventilation. These containers are made by Iris, Rubbermaid, and Sterilite. Racks are usually heated with Flexwatt heat tape either installed along the back wall of the rack as back heat or on the rear half of the floor of each slot as belly heat, and should be monitored with a quality thermostat.

Most Adult garter snakes can easily be maintained in a 20-30 gallon long glass terrarium or similar sized enclosure. Adults can also be kept in commercially available rack systems consisting of appropriate sized sweater to blanket box sized containers (28-32 quart or similar sized), as previously described. Garter snakes are frequent baskers, so providing them with either exposure to natural sunlight or overhead UV lighting will also benefit them if they are being kept in terrariums.

A hide-box for allowing the snake to retreat from view is recommended as part of a terrarium setup as well. Besides commercially available hide boxes, you could modify many things to serve as a hide box. They can include opaque plastic storage container, plastic litter pans for cats, and inverted flowerpots for example. A water dish should also be provided within the enclosure and be changed at least once weekly or sooner if fouled. The dish should be heavy enough so that it isn't easily tipped over (plastic or ceramic crock dishes work well). It should also be cleaned and disinfected periodically.

Temperature and Heating

As with all reptiles, garter snakes are ectothermic animals, meaning it is important to provide them with an external heat source and thermal gradient for proper digestion and gestation. There should be a warm side and a cooler side to the enclosure. To create the warm side, you can use an under tank heater (UTH), Flexwatt heat tape, or a radiant heat panel on one half of the enclosure. Many commercially available plastic and PVC enclosures and racks come with their own heating elements. The warm side should remain around 75-88 degrees Fahrenheit. They may even be kept simply at room temperature if the room or area it is to be housed in remains within 75-88 degrees constantly, attributing to their tolerability and hardiness. It is however, important to disallow any snake to come into direct contact with any heating element, as thermal burns can result, and can sometimes be severe, requiring professional veterinary attention.

Substrate

The substrate is the enclosure's bedding. Newspaper, commercially available cage liner material, cypress mulch, or aspen shavings or Sani Chips are all acceptable substrates that work well for garter snakes. Avoid pine and cedar shavings, as these substrates are toxic to snakes. The substrate should be kept dry and be spot cleaned when needed to reduce the likelihood of bacterial outbreaks. A complete substrate change and replacement should be done periodically as well, with that interval depending on the substrate being used.

Feeding and Diet

In the wild, garter snakes will feed on a variety of prey items including earthworms, insects and other invertebrates, small fish, frogs, toads, salamanders, lizards, and the occasional small rodent. Like many natricine snakes, they are not constrictors, but will simply seize and ingest their food.

In captivity, neonate garter snakes can be started off two to three times weekly on appropriately sized earthworms, and cut up pinky mouse parts. The size of the prey item should be increased accordingly as the snake grows. A general rule of thumb to follow is to offer prey items that are no larger than the widest point of the snake. Adult garter snakes can be offered a variety of prey items including frozen/thawed small to adult mice every three to five days as well as earthworms. Many garters will initially be wary of taking rodents. However, this can usually be overcome through scenting the rodent with frog, earthworm, or fish scent. Some garters will also accept frozen/thawed fish fillets cut into appropriate sizes. Feeding live fish, particularly goldfish, to garter snakes carries the potential of transmitting internal parasites to the snake as well as result in a potentially fatal thiamin vitamin B deficiency (particularly if such a diet is sustained over a relatively long period of time. Despite the diversity accepted prey items that garters will accept, rodents are by far the most nutritionally complete prey items that present the fewest problems for both the snake and keeper. Otherwise vitamin B1, Vitamin D3, and powdered calcium supplements that are commercially available can be added to non rodent prey items to compensate for the nutritional deficiencies they present. It is also important to remember that despite their relatively higher metabolisms, it is possible to overfeed garter snakes, resulting in obesity and compromised health of the snake over time.

Summary

Considering the tremendous array, distribution, and variation among the different garter snake species, subspecies, and localities as well as their great adaptability and hardiness in both captivity and in the wild, garter snakes overall have long been a widely kept choice among many aspiring reptile keepers and seasoned herpetoculturists alike. Garter snakes seem to be experiencing increased levels of popularity in addition, as many different color and pattern morphs of many species and subspecies are produced. Although the garter snakes are frequently overlooked, or even undeservingly looked down upon as “junk snakes”, It should be remembered that even many a seasoned keeper or breeder of other species will often recall having enjoyed their debut into the reptile hobby by capturing and keeping any one or more of these snake species in their areas.