



# Handle with care

## Common garter snake

Species: Common garter snake (and other species)  
Scientific names: *Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis*

### Description:

Common garter snakes come in a variety of different shadings and colours, but the most common colouring is a brown or olive brown background with a narrow, yellow stripe running down the middle of the back. A broader, yellow stripe also runs down either side of a garter snake's body with dark angular blotches running in between. The maximum length that a garter snake can reach is 1.3m, but in captivity they usually grow to about 90cm. The common garter snake can live in captivity for more than 10 years, reaching its maximum size within five years. There are many species of garter snake and much of their care is similar, however please be sure which species you are dealing with as some aspects of their care may be different.

### Life in the wild

Common garter snakes are found in most of the USA except for the south-west. Other subspecies are found throughout the USA, some getting into northern Mexico and southern Canada. They live in forests, fields and residential areas, but never far from water where they can catch tadpoles, frogs and small freshwater fish. They are active during the day.

### Source of animals

The common garter snake and other *Thamnophis sirtalis* subspecies, such as the red-sided garter snake (*T.s.parietalis*) and San Francisco garter snake (*T.s.tetrataenia*), are kept and bred in captivity. Your local veterinary surgeon or a reptile organisation may be able to advise on a reputable source. Alternatively your nearest RSPCA animal centre may know of snakes that need rehoming.

### Prior knowledge and preparation

Before acquiring a snake, it is crucial that any potential keeper finds out about the animal – including how to provide for the animal's needs when kept in captivity, how big it gets and how long it lives. Only then can the keeper make an informed decision about whether s/he can provide the specialist care and captive environment required, and has the facilities, time, financial means and long-term commitment to maintain a good standard of care. The keeper can then acquire suitable accommodation, food and the necessary accessories, and prepare the enclosure to ensure the captive environment is stable before taking the animal home. This also gives the novice keeper time to locate and to talk to relevant experienced keepers and professionals for further advice such as a vet with experience of treating the species, and specialist UK organisations that keep this species in captivity.

### Vet Care/costs/holiday cover

Snakes need specialist handling and treatment. Your veterinary surgeon will advise on the costs of consultations for garter snakes. Your snake will need to be looked after properly every day, including the time that you are away. Ask your vet for details of reputable boarding establishments and reptile groups in the area, or leave your snake in the care of a friend who fully understands its needs.

### Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

A well-housed, healthy garter snake will 'taste' the air frequently and rapidly with its tongue. Its body will feel firm and muscular. Its skin will be smooth and its vent (excretory opening) free of faeces or wetness. Lumps on the skin, nasal discharge, open mouthed breathing or wheezing and the tip of the tongue sticking together can all be signs of an unhealthy snake. Cloudy eyes can also be a sign of ill health, but it can also mean that the snake is preparing to, or hasn't fully, shed its skin. A snake's mouth should close properly and its saliva should be clear.

#### Health issues to find out about

- Skin infections.
- Vitamin B1 deficiency.
- Bone disease.
- Burns following the use of incorrect, or from contact with, heat or light sources.
- Inability to shed (slough) skin.
- Respiratory infections.
- Internal parasites.
- External parasites.
- Mouth rot.
- Dehydration.
- Anorexia.

## Why are garter snakes vulnerable in captivity?

Snakes are completely dependent upon their owners to provide them with the correct accommodation, heating, humidity, lighting and food, all of which must reflect as closely as possible their wild habitat. The correct range and balance of nutrients, vitamins and minerals in their diet is important to maintain good health. Without correct care snakes will suffer from conditions such as mouth rot or bone disease, which may eventually cause death. Adequate ventilation is important to stop the snake developing respiratory problems. The correct humidity is also key in preventing respiratory problems, blister skin disease and problems when the snake sheds its skin. Incorrect lighting and heating, or not using protective guards to stop the snake from having direct contact with heat sources, can result in severe burns to a snake's skin.

## Handling/transporting the animal home

Garter snakes may defecate when handled. A garter snake can be lifted with one hand holding it about one-third of the way along the body and the other hand holding two-thirds of the way along the body, and then held loosely in both hands to fully support its body. Anyone handling snakes or cleaning their enclosure should wash their hands before and after handling the animals to reduce the risk of picking up and spreading bacteria such as *Salmonella*. Washing hands after handling food items can stop the handler smelling like a prey species, which could prevent the snake from treating your hand like food. Snakes should not be handled when shedding their skin, as this can cause stress to the snake and they may behave aggressively if they cannot see very well.

A garter snake can be transported in a tightly secured cloth bag. Small snakes can be transported in ventilated plastic containers packed with absorbent paper. For longer journeys, put the securely tied bag in a ventilated box with shredded newspaper for insulation and cushioning. The bag and box should be of a size to allow the 'coiled' snake to touch the surrounding sides and feel secure. Garter snakes should be transported at a temperature between 21-24°C - too high a temperature is fatal.

## Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

A garter snake will need a vivarium with a glass front and sides, and the floor and roof should be made from waterproofed timber such as melamine sealed with silicone. The vivarium needs to be large enough for the size of the snake being kept, with enough space to contain the hides, as well as both dry and water areas as garter snakes are semi-aquatic in the wild. It must also provide the snake with access to the appropriate range of temperatures and should be well ventilated and kept out of direct sunlight, draughts and a smoky environment. Two or more garter snakes kept together will need a larger enclosure.

A tray of water large enough for the snake to submerge and swim in is needed. The tray should be sited away from the warmer basking area of the vivarium to keep the humidity fairly low. The humidity should be monitored as the provision of a water pool may contribute to a raise in the humidity level, especially if the space in the dry areas is small compared to the size of the pool. Moss can be placed around the water tray to help dry the snake off after leaving the water and to keep the surrounding area dry. The floor of the vivarium should be covered with suitable substrate, such as a layer of dry leaf litter, coral sand, newspaper or AstroTurf. Clean rocks or branches with a rough surface should be put in the enclosure too to help the snake shed its skin and to enrich its environment. A 12-hour light, 12-hour dark cycle is acceptable, but a light cycle with seasonal variations is ideal.

The vivarium's temperature should be between 20-27°C during the day and include a warmer basking site at a temperature of 30°C. A heat and light source that provides a basking area is ideal for this day-active snake to allow it to warm up and dry off after being in the water. A full spectrum light is advised for this day-active reptile. The snake should be unable to have direct contact with the light and heat sources to prevent burns. At night the light should be turned off and the temperature should be slightly reduced. A hide box that provides a refuge for the snake should be placed in both the cooler and warmer areas of the vivarium.

This species is one of the few commonly available snakes that will eat non-rodent prey. Earthworms, small freshwater fish, pinkie mice or strips of beef can be fed to garter snakes. This varied diet can be supplemented with food specifically manufactured for garter snakes (proprietary food). A purely fish-based diet can kill garter snakes. A vitamin/mineral supplement for reptiles that includes Vitamin B<sub>1</sub> should be sprinkled over the food to stop B<sub>1</sub> deficiency. Food should be given only twice a week to adults to avoid overfeeding.

Good hygiene is also important, to include spot cleaning of faeces and the replacement of soiled water as needed and the cleaning of the whole vivarium about once a month. There are products manufactured for cleaning vivariums, but care needs to be taken to thoroughly rinse and dry the vivarium after cleaning before adding the clean substrate, water tray etc., and returning the snake(s).

THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.