

Garter Snake

Species: *sirtalis*
Genus: *Thamnophis*
Family: Colubridae
Order: Squamata
Class: Reptilia
Phylum: Chordata
Kingdom: Animalia



Conditions for Customer Ownership

We hold permits allowing us to transport these organisms. To access permit conditions, [click here](#).

Never purchase living specimens without having a disposition strategy in place.

An end-user permit is required to receive garter snakes in Ohio. This organism must be housed in an escape proof habitat. Do not release this organism into the environment.

Primary Hazard Considerations

As with many other reptiles, snakes can carry salmonella bacteria, which can make people sick. To reduce the chance of infection, always wash your hands thoroughly before and after you handle your snake, and after you handle its food or anything it has touched.

The longer a snake experiences gentle handling by humans, the less threatening it will find the experience. When a garter snake does feel threatened, it may release a harmless, although foul-smelling, musk from the base of its tail. This can be easily washed off with soap and water. At heightened threat levels, it may strike at a human. This is usually for show, but the more threatened it feels, the more likely it will actually bite. The small teeth of the garter snake may leave a scrape that is unlikely to puncture the skin, requiring only a wash with soap and water.

Availability

Garter snakes are generally available year-round. Your snake will arrive in a cloth “critter bag” inside a shipping box. Upon arrival, place your snake in its new home. Take care when opening the bag so that your snake does not escape. It is best to open the bag inside the habitat and allow the snake to emerge on its own. The length of the snake will range from 46–61 cm, but they can reach 120 cm, and their coloration consists of a pattern of yellow stripes on a brown or black background.

Captive Care

Habitat:

- Snakes should be housed in an escape proof container such as a [10-Gallon Tank 21 W 5241](#) with a tight fitting screen top (such as [21 W 5311](#)). A 10-gallon tank is an adequate enclosure for one or two snakes up to 60 cm long. Do not house snakes of different sizes in the same tank—this will lead to problems around feeding time. [Animal bedding 21 W 2295](#) or woodchips can be used as a substrate, along with newspaper, sphagnum moss, or bark chips. Do not use cedar wood in your snake tank—cedar is harmful to reptiles. Change the substrate and wash the tank at least every three months. If the substrate becomes wet, remove it and replace it with new material. A shelter area can be included to provide a hiding spot for the animal. A coconut shell, small box, or similar items are sufficient. Branches can be added to provide climbing room. Include a water dish for the snake to bathe in when it is ready to shed its skin. The dish needs to be big enough for the snake to completely immerse itself in.
- The temperature of the enclosure should be about 70–80°F. A [Heat Lamp 15-5037](#) and/or [Under-Tank Heater 21-2212](#) can be used to achieve this temperature.

Care:

- A garter snake may fast for up to a month, especially before a molt or after shipping. Otherwise, they will accept a variety of foods fit for a carnivore. Live fish are a good food choice. [Crickets 87 W 6100](#) and [Earthworms 87 W 4660](#) are also readily accepted. Make sure the fish are smaller than the head of the snake to make it easier for the animal to swallow, such as feeder fish like [Rosey Red Minnows 87 W 8121](#). Fish or worms should be placed directly in the water dish, which should be wide enough for the snake to swim around in. Feed 2–3 times per week, about three fish or insects per snake depending on the size of the snake. Make sure to provide a shallow water dish for bathing and drinking.
- At all times, garter snakes should be handled gently. As with most reptiles, the snake's body should be supported in the middle, with the hand or arm offered as support or anchorage. The snake should be allowed freedom to move around one's hand and arm, with the head gently led away from a direction not desired.

Information

- Method of reproduction: Garter snakes reproduce sexually. They generally mate after emerging from hibernation in March or April. Instead of laying eggs as most reptiles do, garter snakes are livebearers. Pregnancy becomes obvious about a month after mating occurs, shown by a swelling in the mid-body of the female. Females generally do not eat for the last half of their pregnancy. Birth occurs 90–100 days after mating. Females give birth to 12–40 young anytime from July through October. Newborn garter snakes range from 13–26 cm in length. They eat large quantities of food to fatten up before winter. To prevent breeding, separate male snakes from female snakes.
- Determining sex: Male snakes have a thicker tail base than female snakes. The female snake's tail tapers rapidly compared with a male's tail.

Life Cycle

Live birth occurs 90–100 days after mating. Garter snakes generally live 3–10 years in captivity.

Wild Habitat

Garter snakes are native to North America. They live in a variety of environments: forests, fields, prairies, streams, wetlands, meadows, marshes, and at the edges of ponds (all can hold garter snakes). They are usually found near water. Predators of garter snakes include king snakes, birds, the occasional skunk or opossum, and domestic cats. Their diet in the wild ranges from aquatic invertebrates, amphibian larvae, small frogs, salamanders, baby birds, worms, fish, and rodents.

Disposition

- We do not recommend releasing any non-native animal into the wild since it may have unforeseen effects on our environment.
- Adoption is the preferred disposition of a vertebrate.
- If a capable owner cannot adopt the animal, it may be surrendered to your local humane society.
- If the animal must be euthanized, we recommend consulting the AVMA guidelines on euthanasia (American Veterinary Medical Association, http://www.avma.org/issues/animal_welfare/euthanasia.pdf). A licensed veterinarian is your best choice to euthanize a reptile. The AVMA considers freezing a reptile without anesthesia to be an inhumane method of euthanasia.
- A deceased specimen should be disposed of as soon as possible. Consult your school's recommended procedures for disposal. In general, a small dead vertebrate should be handled with gloves, wrapped in an absorbent material (e.g., newspaper), wrapped again in an opaque plastic bag, then placed inside a opaque plastic bag that is sealed (tied tightly) before being placed in a general garbage container away from students.