



April 22, 2005

### **IT'S A SNAKE!**

Why is it that snakes bring out the loudest blood curdling screams from many people or cause your heart to skip a beat when you are surprised by one in your yard? It must be that slithery, slinking, motion through the grass that just totally surprises us. Or maybe it's those near misses from being bit by a snake from images that we see on TV.

This past month folks have called my office wanting to know how to get rid of snakes in the spring. Garter snakes emerged from their overwintering sites this past month. Garter snakes (*Thamnophis radix* or *T. sirtalis*) in eastern Nebraska may be one of two species, both of which are extremely variable in color. While the majority have orange, yellow, and reddish stripes along the length of its body, some may be very dark or even cream colored. These snakes are usually 2-3 feet in length when full grown. The snakes will sun in the day and hide at night. When approached they will quickly take cover.

The garter snake mates in the spring in large groups, then becomes more secretive in the hot dry portion of the summer. In later summer and fall, the snake gives birth to 12-20 young. Most of the young will not live to the next spring. If attacked or cornered, a garter snake will try to defend themselves. They will never offensively attack any person or pet.

Snakes are not noted to carry any virus or bacteria transferable to humans or pets. They are actually very beneficial, harmless to you and your pets, and should not be killed. Snakes fear

man and pets, and if left alone, they will make every attempt to escape. Garter snakes may frighten you but they are harmless. They feed on many insects, as well as worms and grubs, and are beneficial in gardens or flower beds.

If there is an overwintering site near your home, make sure and caulk or seal all openings to your house or house foundation, 1/4 inch or larger. You can also use 1/8 inch hardware cloth, sheet metal, or steel wool. Total elimination of snakes in your yard is almost impossible because they move in from surrounding areas. There are no chemical sprays, poisons, or fumigants registered for snake control. While there are repellents on the market, most are ineffective in deterring snakes. Removal of debris, rocks, brush, wood piles and tall grass, which are inviting covers for snakes, may help reduce their numbers. Since the garter snake only burrows in loose soil, some hiding places may be eliminated by packing sharp gravel and caulking around stoops and slabs.

Dennis Ferraro, Extension Educator in Douglas County, has studied snake repellents. Most are ineffective in deterring snakes. His investigation clearly demonstrated that naphthalene (moth balls or crystals), sulfur, or a combination of these chemicals are unable to elicit avoidance behavior in the common garter snake. The application of these substances in the home range or in unfamiliar habitat failed to alter the snake's normal behavior. Snakes utilize chemical traces to locate cover, previously used by themselves. Over time, the snakes can habituate to the chemical repellents and associate the odor of the repellents with their home range. Worse yet, they could mistake the repellent applied on the home range and the same repellent applied near your patio as



the same area - part of their new home range. The opposite effect you wanted.

Ferraro says a poisonous snake has not been recorded in Saline County for many years. If you actually did find a poisonous snake, it would go into the record books for Saline County if it can be proven.

So the next time when you yell "Snake!" and the adrenaline rush follows, remember garter snakes are very beneficial in the environment. They are totally harmless to you and pets.

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