

Garter Snakes

Thamnophis species

CAGING: Garter snakes are slender, active snakes, which can be kept in a ten gallon aquarium. On aquariums, use fine mesh wire covers, with clips to hold it on. Be sure they are secure enough to hold the snake. Black and white newspaper or paper towels make good bedding as they are economical and easily removed. Also reptile carpets work very well. Don't use colored paper or sand, shavings, or other bedding which might be swallowed with food, as this can kill your snake. An easy to clean, plastic or ceramic hiding box will provide a sense of security for your snake.

WATER: Fresh water must be available at all times. Garter snakes like to splash in their water dishes. To avoid excessive moisture in the cage, use a large bowl only half full, or use a margarine tub with a hole cut in the lid. Change the paper should it become soaked. Garter snakes are prone to diseases such as scale rot or blisters if their substrate is not kept dry!

TEMPERATURE: Garter snakes don't require terribly high temperatures; 75 to 80 degrees is fine. This can be provided by a heating pad or a red light bulb in a reflector fitting. (A red light bulb will allow the snake to sleep without having to turn off the heat at night.) The heating pad is placed under the cage. The light should be placed above the cage so that it shines down into the cage. Place either one so that only one end of the cage is heated, giving your snake a temperature gradient. A thermometer should be kept in the warm end of the cage to assure that you maintain a good temperature.

FOOD: Garter snakes eat frogs, worms and fish in the wild. Nightcrawlers can be easily obtained at Animal City from spring through fall. Feeder fish are available all year round. Small garter snakes will eat "tuffies", and larger snakes will eat feeder goldfish. It's fun to put the fish right in the water dish and watch the snake catch the fish. Just make sure the cage is dry when your snake is done, and give the snake fresh water. Fish leave slime behind.

Garter snakes need to be fed more often than rodent eating snakes. Twice a week is good. Some garter snakes can be conditioned to eat pinky mice or pinky rats. Place a dead pinky in a container with nightcrawlers for a few minutes. Once it is coated with worm scent, offer it to your snake. Eventually, you may not even have to scent the pinky any more, as long as you offer it cool (not frozen). This diet will reduce the need for frequent feedings. If you keep more than one garter snake in the same cage, they may fight over food, and you may have to remove one of them to a separate container for feeding.

HEALTH: Cages must be kept clean to prevent ticks, mites, infections, scale rot, and other problems. Anti-bacterial cleaning solutions are recommended. One ounce of bleach in ten ounces of water is one such solution. Rinse the cage with clean water after using any solution. Don't use Lysol, Lestoil or other such oil-based cleaners; they are deadly to reptiles.

HANDLING: Garter snakes may bite or musk when first acquired, but they will tame down quickly with handling. Don't handle any snake for 48 hours after feeding, or if it becomes ill or stops feeding, unless the cage needs cleaning. Keep handling to a minimum when your snake is getting ready to shed. The skin can be damaged easily during this time.

This Care Sheet was originally written by New England Herpetological Society. It can be found at www.neherp.com or www.AnimalCityInc.com



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