

Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*) Care Plan

Garter snakes are small to medium sized active terrestrial snakes from North America and Mexico. They can grow up to 125 cm in length.

Suitability as Pets

Generally an easy to maintain non-aggressive snake suitable for a novice keeper. A relatively simple entry level Squamate suitable for most informed reptile keepers.

Keep records of feeding and shedding dates, passing of urates and faeces, weights and any veterinary care.

Sexing & Reproduction

Garter snakes become sexually mature at around 40-50cm in length, from 1-2 years of age. Winter cooling is not essential for breeding but is probably a good idea. Start cooling the vivarium in November or December and maintain them at 10-15°C in a darkened room for 2-3 months. It is a good idea to hibernate your snake for this period even if you do not intend to breed from it. Do not feed for 3 weeks prior to, or during cooling but continue to provide fresh water.

At the beginning of March gradually turn the heat back up and start feeding again.

Garter snakes produce live young. Clutches of up to 25 (sometimes much larger) are produced 90-110 days after mating.

Housing

Garter snakes require a warm, secure vivarium with the correct temperature gradient and places to hide. It is essential that vivarium temperature and humidity are monitored to ensure that your snake is living in the correct environment for the species. Ideally thermometers should be placed at each end of the vivarium. Good ventilation is important.

A vivarium 100cm long x 40cm high x 40cm wide is suitable for an adult pair.

For the first 8 months or so, juveniles can be kept in small plastic containers with ventilation holes covered by mesh in the lids. Place a third of the container only on a heat mat or strip. Kitchen paper can be used as a cheap substrate. Provide a hide box and a shallow water dish.

Faecal material should be removed as soon as possible and the entire vivarium cleaned and disinfected every 2-3 months.

Lighting

No special lighting is required and a 12 hour day/night photoperiod is suitable.

Heating/ Temperature

The vivarium temperature should be 21-28°C during the day, with a night-time drop of a few degrees. There should be a temperature gradient from one end of the enclosure to the other, enabling the snake to regulate its own temperature by moving around. This is best achieved by placing a heat mat or tape under or against the side of the vivarium at one end. A low wattage spot light can be used as a basking lamp. Lights and heaters inside the vivarium must be guarded to prevent direct contact by the snake. Use a thermostat to control the heat system if possible. Hot rocks are not recommended as they induce behaviour problems and can result in thermal burns in some animals.

Furniture (Climbing and shelter)

Provide a hide box or log, and a shallow water dish large enough for total immersion at the cooler end. Newspaper, Astroturf, outdoor carpeting, or peat are all suitable substrates. An object with an abrasive surface such as a piece of bark should be provided to facilitate shedding of the skin.

Water /Humidity

Humidity should range from 50-80%. Regular light misting may help to keep the humidity at the correct level.

Diet / Feeding

In the wild garter snakes eat fish, worms, newts and frogs. In captivity they can be easily maintained on a diet of fish, defrosted mice and invertebrates. There are also some complete diets available for garter snakes.

Some fish eg whitebait contain a thiaminase enzyme which can cause vitamin B deficiency in garter snakes. This is most likely to occur when frozen fish are used and can be prevented by feeding fresh fish instead, or by heating frozen fish in water to 80°C for 5 minutes before feeding.

Your snake may not eat if the environmental conditions are unsuitable, if it is about to shed, or if it is stressed (for example by excessive handling or lack of a hiding place). If snakes are kept in pairs or groups, they should be separated for feeding.

Fresh water should be provided at least every 2 days.

Food Dusting/ Vitamin Supplementation

It a good idea to supplement the diet with vitamin B1 either directly onto the fish or by adding BSP drops (Vetark) to the water.

Preventative Care & Disease Management

Quarantine all new snakes for at least 3 months. During this time record normal patterns of eating, defaecating, weight gain and behaviour and have them examined by a vet.

It is a good idea to take along a fresh faecal sample so that the vet can check for the presence of gastrointestinal parasites such as worms or protozoa.

If your snake shows any signs of illness such as regurgitation, abnormal body position, decreased appetite or abnormal respiration it should be examined by a vet as soon as possible.

Accidents and injuries can happen, both to the reptile and the reptile handler. Not only can bites happen, but also there are diseases that can be transmitted between animals - and that means between reptiles and humans.

Keepers should be ware of the prevention of reptile associated salmonellosis (RAS).

Good hygiene is essential, not only to your pet's health, but to your own.

Reptiles can be non- symptomatic carriers of Salmonella, bacteria that cause sometimes lethal food poisoning.

Children, the aged, and those who are immune-compromised are particularly susceptible to Salmonella from any source.

There are measures you can take to minimize risk:

- After handling your pet reptile, wash your hands with soap for at least 30 seconds, or use hand disinfectant.
- Disinfect any area you used to clean cages, dishes and do not use this area for food preparation.
- Use separate cleaning utensils, not the sponge you use to wash your own dishes.
- Reptiles are NOT recommended if you're pregnant or have a young child or an immuno-compromised person in your home.
- Don't kiss a reptile pet.