



Care of Garter Snakes and Ribbon Snakes



Introduction: Garter snakes and ribbon snakes typically have 3 light, longitudinal stripes on a dark, sometimes checkered, ground color. Varieties with 2 or less stripes may also occur. Adults of many species average around 2' long, and rarely exceed 3', although one subspecies can grow in excess of 4 1/2'. The garter snake life span is between 3 and 10 years old, depending on the species and other factors. There are about 22 species and numerous subspecies of garter snakes and ribbon snakes.

Because garter snakes are common and widespread, and survive in urban areas, they are often the first reptile pet brought home by children. A field guide can be used to help identify the subspecies of garter snake. Garter snakes often attempt to bite and musk when first captured, but with gentle handling most will become docile within a matter of hours. Wild snakes are now protected by law. A permit is required to keep one and they are generally not recommended as pets.

Captivity Requirements:

Almost any aquarium or other solid glass or plastic container is adequate, with the size dependent on the length of the snake. The cage should be at least half as long as the snake. A secure lid is important, since most garter snakes are agile and can climb. A lid which allows some ventilation is advised.

Newspaper is the best cage substrate. It is cheap and easy to change. If other substrates are used they must be cleaned or changed frequently. The water dish should be heavy so that it can not be tipped by the snake and large enough for the snake to submerge in. The remainder of the cage should be kept dry at all times; garter snakes kept in a wet environment can develop severe blisters. Some sort of hiding place should be provided. Either a rolled newspaper or a cardboard box with a hole is effective and can be changed easily. Supplemental heat should be provided at one of the cage. The temperature should never go below 75°F. The snake should be provided a basking spot with temperatures ranging between 85°-95°F.

Diet:

Most species of garter snakes eat earthworms, fish, and frogs. Some of the semi-aquatic species such as ribbon snakes will not eat earthworms. Some individuals of the eastern garter snake and a few other species will accept pinky mice. A diet of earthworms or night crawlers and whole raw fish such as smelt is adequate for most species. Worms should be dusted with a high quality calcium powder at each feeding.