

Garter and Water Snakes

Includes garter, ribbon, and green grass varieties



CARE SHEET

Developed with and approved by a Qualified Veterinarian

These snakes are found throughout North America and seldom wander very far from the water. Some species of water snakes are known to be snappy, but do calm down in captivity with frequent handling. They require a habitat that is large for their size, but they are relatively easy to maintain.



Is a garter or water snake the right companion animal for you?

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Check "Yes" or "No" after reading the following statements:

1. I can accommodate a snake that may grow to five feet.
2. I am comfortable handling a snake.
3. I am comfortable feeding live food to a snake.
4. I can commit to providing proper care for this snake.
5. A mature person will provide responsible and primary care for this companion animal.

If you answered "Yes" to these statements, a garter or water snake may be the right choice for you! Continue reading about how to care for a garter or water snake and consult with a PETCO associate to learn more. PETCO is committed to responsible companion animal care.

Average Size 2 to 5 feet long

Life Span Up to 15+ years with proper care

Diet Feeder fish; green grass snakes eat crickets

Feeding Feed water and garter snakes 2–3 times a week

Housing Size – Appropriate size and shape habitat to accommodate normal behaviors and exercise with secure lid

Substrate – Provide a deep substrate, such as bark chips, aspen shavings, sphagnum moss, or sterile potting soil; keep substrate dry for garter snake species

Habitat – Provide a hiding place, such as cork bark or a hide box, and branches for climbing; maintain relatively humid conditions

Temperature – Temperature gradient (85° F. for the warm end and 65° F. for the cool end); recommend radiant heat; use an incandescent light or ceramic heater as primary heat source, use undertank heater as secondary source

Lighting – Snakes need a photoperiod light cycle; provide 8–12 hours of light daily; do not leave white light on at all times; to view snakes at night, use a black or infrared light

Water – Provide a large bowl of fresh water for drinking and swimming

Do not house different species of reptiles together

Recommended Supplies

Depends on species

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Habitat with secure lid | <input type="checkbox"/> Substrate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thermometer | <input type="checkbox"/> Hide box or driftwood |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Misting bottle | <input type="checkbox"/> Water dish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Humidity gauge | <input type="checkbox"/> Undertank heat source |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Book about garter or water snakes | <input type="checkbox"/> Incandescent light or ceramic heater |

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Normal Behavior and Interaction

Garter or water snakes are mainly diurnal (awake during the day), but are often active in the early evening

Some species are extremely active compared to other snakes

Habitat Maintenance

Change water daily

Thoroughly clean the tank at least once a week: set snake aside in a secure habitat; scrub the tank and furnishings with a 3% bleach solution; rinse thoroughly with water, removing all smell of bleach; dry the tank and furnishings; and add clean substrate

Grooming and Hygiene

Garter and water snakes will regularly shed their skin; ensure humidity of habitat is at appropriate level to allow snake to shed properly

To facilitate shedding, provide a large container allowing snake to immerse entire body

Always wash your hands before and after touching your snake or habitat contents to help prevent *Salmonella* and other infectious diseases

Signs of a Healthy Animal

- Clear eyes (except when shedding)
- Clear nose and mouth
- Body is rounded and full
- Active and alert
- Eats regularly
- Healthy skin

Common Health Issues

Health Issue (alpha)	Symptoms or Causes	Suggested Action
Dermatitis	Blisters. Rapid shedding caused by an unclean habitat or one that is too cold or damp.	Clean the cage and lower humidity. Consult your exotic animal veterinarian.
Respiratory Disease	Labored breathing. Mucus in mouth or nostrils. Can be caused by a habitat that is too cold or damp.	Keep snake warm and dry. Consult your exotic animal veterinarian.
Stomatitis	White, cheesy substance in the mouth; loss of teeth and appetite.	If untreated, can be fatal. Consult your exotic animal veterinarian.
Ticks and Mites	Parasites on skin. Can transmit disease.	Consult your exotic animal veterinarian.

Red Flags

- Wrinkled or rubbed skin
- Discharge in nose or mouth
- Abnormal feces or urine
- Vomiting
- Lethargy
- Decreased appetite

If you notice any of these signs, please contact your exotic animal veterinarian.

Sources

A Petkeeper's Guide to Reptiles & Amphibians by David Alderton

Keeping and Breeding Snakes by Chris Mattison

The Proper Care of Snakes by Armin Geus

Note: The information on this Care Sheet is not a substitute for veterinary care. If you need additional information, please refer to the above sources or contact your veterinarian as appropriate.