

There's a snake in the garden...

Amphibian and
Reptile Groups
of the UK
www.arguk.org



Why we don't remove snakes from gardens

Neither ARG UK nor The Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (ARC) Trust www.arc-trust.org offer a 'snake removal' service. Indeed, this would run counter to our objectives. There are also practical problems with 'snake removal':

- Will the snake still be there for removal several hours or even days later when the snake handler arrives?
- What is to be done with a removed snake? Wild snakes are protected by law.
- Will removing a snake prevent further such animals entering the garden?

We do, however, understand that the appearance of a snake in the garden (or elsewhere) can be disconcerting to those unfamiliar with, or fearful of, snakes. Sometimes understanding a little about snakes can provide reassurance, allowing continued enjoyment of the garden and its wildlife. Alternatively, we offer some advice on making a garden less attractive to snakes.

Identification

Most 'snakes' in gardens turn out to be slow-worms or grass snakes, both of which are harmless to people. Help in identifying snakes is provided overleaf.

Non-native snakes are popular pets, and so a snake seen in a residential area, not fitting the descriptions of one of our native species, may be an escaped pet. Legal restrictions ensure that venomous snakes are rarely kept as pets – but expert advice should always be sought to ensure identification.

Understanding a little about 'snakes'

Slow-worms are the reptile most likely to be found in the garden Slow-worms are not, in fact, snakes, but legless lizards. They feed on soft bodied invertebrates, especially slugs, so they are helpful to gardeners. Slow-worms do not move far, but a population is likely to occupy an area larger than a single garden. Removing slow-worms from a garden will not necessarily remove a local population.

Grass snakes are the snake most likely to be encountered in gardens and especially in or near garden ponds They are, however, relatively mobile and in most cases are visitors rather than residents, especially in gardens frequented by people. A grass snake seen in the garden may not return again, although if your garden falls within 'grass snake territory', several grass snakes may visit over the course of a year. Hence, removal of a snake cannot prevent future visits by different snakes (although in most cases grass snake visits go unnoticed, anyway).

Grass snakes feed on frogs, toads and newts but they can also catch small fish. Garden owners concerned about this natural predation should be aware that snakes eat relatively few large items per year. A single grass snake is unlikely to eat all of the garden's frogs.

Still scared of snakes?

For those with an extreme fear of snakes the above information may not help. In the case of phobia alternative options should be considered. Snakes can be discouraged from entering gardens by making them unattractive to them. Such action is extreme and requires removing any items that could provide a place for snakes to shelter in or under. So converting the whole garden to a closely mown lawn or paving and keeping it clear of anything lying on the ground should discourage snakes.

Slow-worm



Adults 35-40 cm. Generally grey or brown. Small, shiny scales, giving a metallic appearance. Females and young have darker coloured flanks and often a black line running along the back.

Key facts In some areas of the country slow-worms live in gardens and allotments. They spend most of their time hidden away but are most commonly found in compost heaps/bins, or under debris or paving slabs. Harmless to people and pets.

Grass snake

Adults 70-100 cm, in rare cases larger.



Cream, yellow or white collar behind the head, bordered to the rear by black marks.

Key facts May visit garden ponds (in search of amphibian prey) or large compost heaps (where females may lay eggs). Harmless to people and pets.

Adder

A stocky snake, adults 40-70 cm.

Variable coloration, mostly grey or brown with a distinct zigzag pattern along the back. Occasionally black adders occur.

Key facts Wide distribution, but does not move far from favoured habitat (heathland, downs, scrub, woodland edge, road and rail embankments). Only likely to enter gardens close to 'adder sites'. Local [Amphibian and Reptile Groups](#) usually know which areas they occur in. Venomous but not aggressive.



Snakes are a conservation priority

Our snake species and the slow-worm are legally protected from killing or injury (Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended).

If you want to find out more about snakes or other reptiles and amphibians in the garden the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust www.arc-trust.org can provide further advice on request.