



Garter Snakes

Thamnophis spp.

BEGINNER • 18–26 IN ADULT • DIURNAL • LIVE-BEARING • NORTH AMERICA

Most of us met this snake first, under a board, along a creek, crossing the garden path. Garter snakes bring that backyard energy indoors: small, quick, alert and busy all day, out working the enclosure while most snakes wait for dark. Captive-bred animals settle into confident, watchable pets. The honest trade: they're movement, not muscle. Expect darting curiosity instead of a slow, holdable coil, plus a little musk while they're young.

AT A GLANCE	
Difficulty	Beginner
Adult size	18–26 in
Ambient temp	75–82 °F (68–72 °F night)
Basking spot	85–88 °F
Humidity	50–70%
UVB	Recommended
Diet	Fish, worms, mice
Feeding	Every 3–5 days
Representative	Common garter (<i>T. sirtalis</i>)



From wild-type stripes to flame and albino morphs, captive-bred garters are regulars on NARBC show tables.

Photo: Tom Kennedy / iNaturalist · CC BY

01

Temperament & Handling

Garters are the opposite of the classic pet python: diurnal, quick, curious and always on the move. A settled captive-bred animal will cruise out to watch you and take food boldly, but it explores hands rather than resting in them. Keep grips loose and low. Startled youngsters may musk and thrash; it fades with calm, regular contact. Their activity is the appeal: this is a snake you watch behave, not one you park on the couch.

02

Housing by Life Stage

Floor space beats height. Garters patrol horizontally all day, so give the biggest footprint you can and let the table below set your minimums. Fit a genuinely locking lid; a garter will find any gap a pencil fits through. They're also the rare snake sometimes kept in same-sex groups, but treat that as an advanced project: duplicate hides, watch for bullying, and always separate the animals to feed. The classic cohab accident is two snakes grabbing one meal.

STAGE	MINIMUM	PREFERRED	NOTES
Neonate	12×8×8	16×12×12	Born live, not hatched. Neonates are active and hunting almost immediately.
Juvenile	20×12×12	24×18×12	Fish- or worm-based diets are common here; most convert to rodents in time.
Subadult	24×18×12	36×18×18	Active and diurnal; UVB recommended.
Adult	36×18×18	48×24×18	Same-sex groups possible with care; always feed separately.

Minimum and preferred sizes follow Habitat-OS life-stage guidance (benchmark: common garter, *Thamnophis sirtalis*).

03

Heat & Light

Run a basking surface of 85–88 °F over a daytime ambient of 75–82 °F, then let the whole enclosure drift down to 68–72 °F at night. Garters bask in the open like tiny monitors, so overhead heat (a halogen on a thermostat) beats belly heat for both function and behavior. This is a truly diurnal snake, and UVB is recommended: a low-output strip spanning the basking zone rounds out honest daylight.

04

Humidity & Water

Hold humidity at a moderate 50–70%, not tropical. In the wild most garters hunt near water, so offer a dish big enough for a full soak and expect them to use it; refresh it often, because they'll foul it. The trap is wetness underfoot: chronically damp substrate causes blister disease faster than dry air causes stuck shed. Ventilate well, keep bedding dry to the touch, and add a moss-filled humid hide when the eyes go blue.

05

Substrate & Enrichment

A few inches of aspen or coconut chip gives them something to tunnel through, topped with dry leaf litter to nose around in. Then clutter the room: cork rounds, low branches, fake or live plants, and at least one hide at each end of the temperature range. An active, visual forager with nothing to investigate becomes a pacing, nose-rubbing snake; rearranging the furniture now and then is cheap, effective enrichment.

06

Feeding

Variety is the point: fish, earthworms and, in time, mice, taken every 3–5 days on a metabolism quicker than the rodent-only snakes. Whole nightcrawlers and appropriately sized frozen/thawed rodents make the best staples; many keepers scent a pinky with fish to convert a stubborn feeder. The rule that matters: **never build the diet on thiaminase-heavy fish like goldfish or rosy red minnows**. The enzyme destroys vitamin B1, and the deficiency cripples before it kills. Silversides are the safe fish; skip red wiggler worms as well.

07

Health Red Flags

The garter-specific emergency is B1 deficiency from a thiaminase-heavy diet: tremors, corkscrewing, stargazing, a snake that rolls over and struggles to right itself. That's an emergency vet visit and an immediate diet fix, not a wait-and-see. Watch, too, for raised or blistered belly scales (a wet enclosure), open-mouth breathing (a cold one), and mites on new arrivals, plenty of which still enter the hobby wild-caught. A weekly belly check and a monthly weigh-in catch nearly everything early; when in doubt, go to the reptile vet.

Husbandry data: Habitat-OS species library. Structure follows the NARBC show handout series. Every animal is an individual — when in doubt, ask the breeder at the table or a reptile veterinarian.