

Feeling Safe, with Snakes, in the Florida Garden

By Mary McIntire, Master Gardener



At the end of November 2016, my husband and I jumped into the car and headed for retirement in sunny Florida. We were very excited to start our new life! As I have always been an avid gardener, I immediately joined the garden club in my new development and was soon recruited to be the lead of one of the 11 butterfly gardens manned by the club. I was delighted! I love butterflies, I love gardening, what a great fit!

Well, maybe not so much. Gail, the garden coordinator, took me for a tour of the gardens, explained what was expected, and helped to identify the many plants in my little garden. As we were walking, much to my dismay and horror, a huge, thick bodied snake slithered across the sidewalk in front of us. Gail was brave enough to get a picture and informed me later that it was a Cottonmouth snake. Yikes! I convinced myself that this was an isolated incident, but alas it was not. I again encountered snakes on my 2nd and 3rd trips to the butterfly garden.

Determined to not allow the seemingly plethora of Florida snakes ruin my Florida gardening life, I decided to learn what I could about snakes to help alleviate some of my fears. Every good research project goes back to basics, so, exactly what are snakes? Snakes are long, limbless reptiles, with no eyelids or ears and have jaws that are capable of considerable extension. That surely didn't help alleviate any fears! Well, then, what are snakes good for? According to the Department of Environment and Heritage Protection, without snakes, we would be completely overrun by nuisance rodents, such as mice and rats. Snakes also eat other snakes. That helps! I am feeling a bit better!

You might ask, "Aren't some snakes poisonous?" to which I would have to answer "No". The correct word is venomous. And yes, there are venomous snakes in Florida. Luckily, of the 50 species of Florida snakes, only 6 are venomous. In general, venomous snakes have a triangular shaped head, an obvious neck, elliptical eye pupils and a thick body for its length. Non-venomous snakes are slenderer and their heads seem to attach to their bodies without a neck and they have round eye pupils. The most common venomous snakes in Florida are the rattlesnakes, cottonmouths, and the coral snake. You can access ufwildlife.ifas.ufl.edu to see some excellent pictures and obtain additional information.

By keeping your garden tidy, you can avoid welcoming snakes into your garden. Keep the grass cut to the appropriate level, remove any low hanging branches, and remove any hiding places such as rock piles. Keep all pet and bird food in sealed containers. Be careful with your water supply, fix any dripping spigots, and eliminate any standing water.

There are some precautions that should be taken before heading out to your garden. Be sure to wear hard shoes or boots, long pants and a long sleeve shirt (if you can tolerate them in the heat). Once at the garden, stomp around to make enough vibrations that the snakes will know that you are there (snakes can't hear). Survey the garden for snakes and make certain that you do not put your hands or feet anywhere you cannot see the surroundings. Use a long-handled shovel or rake when moving anything that has been lying on the ground, and always have your cell phone with you.

In the very unlikely chance that you do get bitten by a snake, stay calm! Call 911 immediately and get a picture of the snake if possible. Allow the wound to bleed and remove any restrictive clothing or jewelry in case of swelling. Splinting the arm or leg will help to reduce the blood circulation by restricting movement of the bitten limb. Wait for assistance. Do not attempt to drive yourself to the emergency facility.

The good news for me is that I have not encountered another snake since starting my research. When I do see one again, I am confident that I will be able to respond appropriately. Humans kill thousands of snakes each year, but only 5-6 people die each year of snake bites. That is 5-6 too many. Hopefully this article will help you, too, to feel (and stay) safe in your Florida garden.

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