

Controlling Problems Caused By Snakes



Michigan State University Extension-Oakland County

In most situations involving snakes, there is no real problem and thus no real solution. These situations involve a harmless species of snake whose presence may be very beneficial. The person involved, however, may be unjustifiably afraid of all snakes and may have a fear so intense that it can produce a hysterical frenzy or paralysis.

When the situation involves harmless snakes, in yards or out buildings, the problem can be solved simply by...

- 1) realizing that these animals are completely harmless and probably very beneficial
- 2) recognizing that fear of them is irrational
- 3) understanding that any possible solution can cause genuine harm or loss

When the irrational fear is highly cherished, considerable effort, expense, and even risk is appropriate in order to maintain that cherished irrational fear.

Where snakes find their way into homes or where poisonous snakes are involved, then a genuine problem exists and control measures are justifiable and necessary. The following information should be helpful in solving these problem situations.

Non-Poisonous snakes in yards



Non-poisonous snakes in yards and out buildings create no real problems and are probably beneficial. Enjoy

them or ignore them. If this is not possible, consider that the following control methods involve time, effort, expense, needless exposure to toxicants, and may result in a reduction in the appearance of the yard, thus causing more loss or harm than any possible benefit they can provide. An inability to identify snakes is not a excuse for universal control because Michigan's one species of poisonous snake is easily recognized.

To greatly reduce the possibility of snakes occurring in yards, eliminate any materials that would provide harborage for the snakes or the food they seek. Such materials include loose trash (wood, cardboard, paper, junk, and piles of lumber, firewood, bricks, pipe, sand, gravel, Bark, topsoil and leaves and other yard waste). Garbage cans should be metal or at least very heavy plastic with secure tight-fitting lids and with undamaged tops, bottoms and sides. Any

materials that would provide foods for rodents or insects such as dog food, wild bird seed, stored food, etc. should be stored in heavy plastic or metal containers with tight fitting lids.

Keep all grass mowed as short as possible and trim and prune the lower branches of all trees and shrubs so that no foliage comes within 18 inches off the ground. Eliminate multiple stemmed shrubs or confine the shrubs to three or less stems. Eliminate all flowers that grow in dense clumps or continuous beds and plant or thin all other flowers so that the foliage of one flower does not touch the foliage of another. Implement pest management practices to reduce the presence of insects and rodents. This technique will reduce other animals in the food chain for the snakes to prey upon.

Snakes occur in houses for one of the following reasons:

- They may enter in search of prey or in an attempt to find a hiding place from predators, heat or cold.
- They may enter the home while seeking a place to hibernate or while emerging from their hibernation place.

A snake most commonly found in homes in search of prey is the milk snake, a grey serpent with rusty red blotches bordered in black. It so frequently enters structures in search of mice that it also has the names "house snake" and "barn snake". The second common snake the occasionally invades homes is the garter snake, recognized by its three cream or light green stripes running head to tail separated by two wider stripes that range from brown to almost black.

To eliminate non-poisonous snakes from homes, follow, as much as possible, the following recommendations. Be certain of the identification as non-poisonous.

- 1) Catch any snake seen in the house and release it outside away from the house. Since non-poisonous snakes have very tiny teeth, a light pair of gloves and long sleeves will pro-

tect the skin from being scratched if the animal attempts to bite. If handling snakes is out of the question, then they are easily killed by striking them with any hard object. If the snake hides before it can be caught or killed, place several damp cloths on the floor and cover them with a dry cloth. Snakes will often crawl between the cloths where they can be caught or killed.

- 2) Trapping Snakes in Homes: Snakes can be easily trapped using rat glue trays, also called glue boards. Small snakes (less than 12" long) can be caught in mouse glue trays. Fasten 2 or 3 glue trays with tacks to a 1" x 6" board and place where snakes have been seen or are likely to crawl. Use additional trays and board for larger snakes. When a snake is trapped, take board and trays outside and pour and pour vegetable oil on the snake and glue board. The vegetable oil will deactivate the glue and allow the snake to go free. Do not use glue trays outside. A common trade name for glue trays is Tanglefoot.

- 3) In the vast majority of cases, snakes enter the home very near the ground line. Thus one of the most effective ways of keeping them out of the house is to inspect and repair the foundation at ground line, the place where the foundation meets the frame of the house, and around any windows and doors at ground levels. All openings 1/4 inch wide should be plugged using any convenient material-insulation, steel wool, caulk, wood, or masonry. If mice are also a problem, then the openings must be plugged with rodent proof material, such as masonry, sheet steel or welded wire.

- 4) Clean up all materials that provide food and cover for insects and rodents to reduce the snakes' food supply. All foods and anything edible should be stored in tight-fitting containers. All spilled food, grease, etc. should be cleaned up immediately. Any accumulations of wood, cloth, paper, cardboard, etc. should be removed.

- 5) Use the appropriate insecticides to eliminate

whatever ants, roaches, termites etc. that might be in and around the home, especially on floors near ground level or below. If rodents are present, apply the readily available commercial rodenticides as directed. It is important to note, however, that the use of these poisons might pose a greater hazard to the occupants of a house than the non-poisonous snakes do. However, animals such as roaches, termites, mice, and rats pose a potential threat to the inhabitants of the house in terms of health and structural damage to the home and thus should be eliminated. In the process of eliminating them, the snakes will find the house less hospitable.

The Occurrence of Snakes in Large Numbers in Spring and Fall

Occasionally homeowners find their house and/or grounds suddenly having many snakes, often a dozen or more. This usually occurs because the snakes have found a suitable place to hibernate, usually along the stone and masonry foundation of a Michigan basement. Because the sides of the walls are irregular, sometimes even containing cavities or holes, snakes, such as garter snakes or milk snakes find holes from the surface that lead down to these cavities where they go in the late fall to hibernate throughout the winter often together in large numbers. Thus when the snakes leave in early spring there are large numbers apparent in and around the house. The same phenomena may also occur in the fall when the snakes congregate at the same place to resume hibernation. Young snakes that were born or hatched during the summer also return thus producing the apparent effect of having been produced in the home, but snakes rarely reproduce in houses. Occasionally during warm spells in mid-winter snakes may be fooled into breaking hibernation and occasionally show up in basements. When this occurs eliminate the snakes in the house as suggested previously.

To prevent these problems from recurring, touch-up the foundation with masonry wherev-

er gaps, holes, or cavities are seen on the inside and above the ground on the outside. If necessary, where openings in the earth suggest the passage to deeper spaces between the wall and the earth, excavate along the side of the foundation to destroy these cavities. Snakes will also hibernate in the spaces in concrete blocks. To prevent snakes from hibernating in the spaces in concrete block walls, snakes must be excluded from the inside of the foundation (the crawl space or basement). See (3).

Poisonous Snakes

The only poisonous snake that occurs in Michigan is the Eastern Massasauga rattlesnake (also called the Prairie Marsh Rattler). The Massasauga is easily recognized because on the tip of the tail there will be one or more hard hollow shell-like segments. When several of these are present, the easily recognized "rattle" can be seen and heard. In addition, the Massasauga rattlesnake is the only snake in Michigan with a blotched pattern on its back and a black belly.

The habitat of this snake is marshes and swamps and as a result, the snake is found only in or immediately adjacent to these locations. During periods of high water or drought the snakes may move into adjacent uplands such as roads, meadows, or yards in order to escape the high water or to seek food. Thus, if a yard immediately adjoins a large marsh or swamp and Massasauga rattlesnakes are occasionally seen in the yard, the owners may wish to take the following measures in addition to the ones previously mentioned especially if small children are present.

Massasauga rattlesnakes are rarely abundant so persistent killing by clubbing with a long handled implement such as a shovel, rake or hoe will usually reduce the incidence of these reptiles around a home site.

If the problem occurs repeatedly then it may be desirable to enclose all or a portion of the yard in a snake-proof fence. The following de-

sign description for a snake-proof fence is easy and inexpensive to build. Basically it is an 18" high slanted wire mesh fence supported by 1" x 1" posts with the bottom edge buried an inch in the ground. If it is necessary to build a gate in the fence, the gate should be hinged so as to lie in the same plane as the fence. It should be extremely tight fitting. Since the gate must be able to swing upward and inward the bottom edge of the gate should have a skirt of hardware cloth to further insure its impenetrability. If given the chance, Massasugus almost always retreat when threatened to their marshy or swampy habitat.



Would you like additional information?

Additional information is available on-line. Please see [MSU Extension-Oakland County's publications](#) as well as the [MSU Extension Bookstore](#) on campus.

Please contact our office (248/858-0880) for assistance.

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

Extension
OAKLAND COUNTY

Prepared by Glen R. Dudderar, Extension Wildlife Specialist, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, 1990.

Distributed by MSU Extension-Oakland County, 1200 N. Telegraph Road, Pontiac, MI 48341, 248/858-0880, <http://www.oakgov.com/msu>. Reviewed by Charlene Molnar, Horticulture Advisor, September 2013.

MSU is an affirmative-action equal opportunity employer. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status.