

TIPS FOR GARDENERS TO HELP REPTILES

The Carolinian Region of southern Ontario is home to 23 native reptile species, including 7 turtles, 15 snakes, and one lizard. Unfortunately, these reptiles are under pressure from centuries of settlement, agriculture, development and urbanization. Creating safe habitat away from these threats is one way we can help conserve reptile populations.



While numerous threats abound, there are many things the public can do to help reptiles. Gardeners, native plant lovers and those involved in habitat restoration in urban and rural areas are on the front lines and have innumerable opportunities to assist conservation. The following tips will benefit not only reptiles, they will likely help attract other wildlife species, including birds, butterflies and amphibians. There are added benefits to attracting reptiles to a garden. For example, many large snakes, such as Milksnake and Eastern Foxsnake (see photo), are highly effective rodent predators; small snakes can eat slugs; and, many turtles feed on decaying plant material and carrion in ponds.



Gardening tips:

- Restore the native plant diversity suitable for your garden, property or project site, including site-appropriate native herbaceous plants, shrubs and trees. Many wildlife species, including snakes and lizards, seek shelter, hunt or bask (i.e. warm themselves) in the branches of trees and shrubs, so creating structural and biological diversity is helpful.
- Make natural connections: create wildlife corridors between natural areas, buffer sensitive habitats by expanding natural areas, enlarge natural areas by complementing the habitat restoration and native plant gardening efforts on neighbouring properties.
- Retain woody debris, brush piles and leaf litter. Organic matter not only enriches the soil, but it also provides shelter and hiding places for most species of reptile at various times of the year – even providing protection from the cold (or excessive heat) in various seasons.
- Create safe basking sites for reptiles. Since reptiles obtain their required body warmth from their environment, the presence of safe basking sites for sunning is vitally important. For snakes or small lizards, basking sites can be created easily with brush piles or mounds of cobble stone or other material; these materials also provide hiding places and escape routes from predators.
- Create and maintain large compost piles as nesting sites for egg-laying snakes and other reptiles*. Many snake species, including Eastern Foxsnake, Gray Ratsnake and Milksnake, lay their eggs in rotting vegetation, decaying stumps or other composting organic matter. These micro-habitats were common in old growth forests, but the scarcity of old growth in human-altered landscapes highlights the importance of creating alternatives.
- Create turtle nesting habitat*. If you have a pond, leave it as natural as possible, allowing edges to become vegetated with native plants, shrubs and trees. Install a sand/gravel pile nearby to provide safe nesting areas; burying weed barrier (i.e. garden centre fabric cloth) c. 40cm below the top of the sand will reduce growth of plants (direct sun warms the substrate and helps in egg incubation).



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- Where space permits, create over-wintering habitat for snakes*. In colder climates, many snakes retreat to underground wintering chambers called hibernacula (singular – hibernaculum). Building a hibernaculum is a specialty project, generally involving the use of a backhoe to ensure that it is sufficiently deep and that the bottom-most chamber is below the frost line.
- Create or enhance water features on your property. Water is a natural draw for birds, amphibians, reptiles and virtually all wildlife. Even the smallest of water features, such as bird baths and small pools, can attract wildlife. If you are fortunate enough to have a space for a pond, leave it as natural as possible and plant aquatic and emergent plants, and install other features, such as sandbars, bird and bat houses to promote even greater biodiversity. For turtles, such as these Midland Painted Turtles, anchoring a sunning log or board away from shore can provide a safe basking site.



* See LPBLT website (Resources page) for tips on creating reptile habitats

A few cautions:

- Avoid the temptation to work your soil too early in the spring (either by hand or tilling) since some reptiles (e.g. hatchling turtles from the prior year or Hog-nosed Snakes) as well as amphibians (e.g. American Toad) may over-winter in the soil and be inadvertently harmed.
- If you have a particularly active large mulch pile, avoid disturbing it during the summer months in case an egg-laying snake (or even turtle or lizard) has chosen your compost to lay its eggs. Similarly, if a turtle decides to lay its eggs in the middle of your vegetable garden, be nice and share the space ...even if it means giving up on that section of the potato patch for the year!
- Some common garden products can be particularly hazardous for snakes. For example, the garden netting used to support beans and peas, or to discourage birds from landing on fruit trees, can ensnare snakes causing their slow and painful death. Small meshed chicken wire can cause similar hazards. For beans and peas, install netting above the ground so that snakes can pass underneath – or use trellises or other approaches. Avoid leaving mesh products, chicken wire or similar hazards on the ground.
- If you or others in your home are leery about snakes, all that is generally required is a little benign indifference – step back and give the wildlife a chance to leave on its own. Most snakes and other reptiles, such as this melanistic Eastern Gartersnake, are very shy and will willingly retreat.



Long Point Basin Land Trust protects important natural habitats in the central Carolinian Region in southern Ontario. It promotes conservation through outreach, research, habitat restoration, and species at risk recovery projects. For more information about this charitable conservation organization, please visit our website or sign up for our newsletter (print or e-news). Please report reptile sightings from the Long Point Basin to: longpointlandtrust.ca

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