

A Snake in the Grass: Rattlesnakes in Gardens

by Kathi Joye

Rattlesnakes in your garden... it's possible. The Northern Pacific Rattlesnake (a subspecies of the Western Rattlesnake) can be found in numerous habitats throughout our foothills and higher elevations up to 11,000 feet. They need den sites (such as rodent boroughs, rock crevices, rotting logs, etc.) that can protect them from temperature extremes, and they need a decent rodent population to hunt for food. Meadows, forests, range lands and even home gardens can provide all these requirements.



April through October is the time of year when rattlesnakes are most active. They hibernate during the winter in an attempt to survive frigid temperatures. Our recent early, dry, warm spring could mean a greater winter survival rate; thus, more rattlesnakes in our foothill communities. As ectoderms, rattlesnakes function best at temperatures ranging from 77-89 degrees Fahrenheit. This means that rattlesnakes can be active on warm nights.

Rattlesnakes are best identified by their triangular-shaped head. They and other snakes resembling rattlesnakes are an important part of our foothill ecosystem. They are predators that help keep prey populations in balance. Despite their beneficial attributes, many people have zero tolerance regarding rattlesnakes near their home due to their potentially harmful impact, particularly on unsuspecting children and pets. However, habitat modification and exclusion practices should be attempted before resorting to extermination.

To keep rattlesnakes from taking up residence in your garden or yard, you can eliminate all hiding places that a rattlesnake could use as a den. Remove lumber piles, rock piles, and rotting stumps and logs. Mow tall grasses and weeds, and clear underbrush. Fill in boroughs. And, since rattlesnakes primarily feed on rodents (squirrels, rats, rabbits etc.), control the rodent populations to decrease the attractiveness of the area as a rattlesnake home. These strategies are known as habitat modification.

The University of California Integrated Pest Management website, <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu>, contains a "Rattlesnake Pest Note" that also suggests the practice of exclusion to keep rattlesnakes from your yard and garden areas. Solid or small-holed mesh fences, three feet high and buried a few inches into the ground can be used to protect gardens and play areas. It is important that all gates to these enclosures fit tightly and that all vegetation is removed from around the perimeter and on the fences.

To exclude rattlesnakes from hiding in and under buildings, basements, and garages, as well as enclosures for pools and hot tubs, seal all cracks that are larger than ¼ inch. When outdoors during this time of year, you should exercise caution to avoid an unwelcome encounter with a rattlesnake. Do not go barefoot or stick body parts in places that you can't see well. Always look

for snakes when stepping near logs, raised garden beds and rock borders as snakes like to hide along their edges. Be cautious around pools, fountains and fishponds, as snakes are attracted to the moisture on hot days and they are excellent swimmers. Look carefully when reaching for firewood, sticks or vegetables from thickly foliated plants.

Most bites occur when people try to handle or kill rattlesnakes. If you do kill a rattlesnake, be aware that it can still bite you—warm hands can trigger a strike reflex since sensory heat pits still function hours after death. If you do need to eradicate a rattlesnake that has taken up residence at your home, it is best to call a professional pest expert with rattlesnake removal skills to solve this problem. If you do encounter a rattlesnake, leave it alone; most of the time it will head off to someplace else.

In the U.S., the chances of being killed by a rattlesnake bite are 5-6 times LESS than the chances of being killed by a lightning strike. However, in the rare event that you should happen to be bitten by a rattlesnake, the California Poison Control Center offers the following advice: stay calm; wash the bite area gently with soap and water; remove watches, rings, etc., which may constrict swelling; immobilize the affected area and transport safely to the nearest medical facility.

For more information on rattlesnakes, visit

<http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74119.html>

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