## **YVCipedia REPTILE**

Garter Snake Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

**Garter snakes** (*Thamnophis* spp.) are **small, active, diurnal colubrids** found widely across North America. Famous for their colorful stripes, adaptability, and lively nature, they are one of the **most familiar wild snakes in the U.S.** and have also become popular pets—especially as captive-bred morphs and localities become more available.

Garter snakes are **generally hardy, inquisitive, and tolerant of gentle handling** when properly acclimated. They have a **moderate adult size**, typically **18–36 inches** long (some species up to 4 feet). With proper care, they can live **8–15 years** in captivity.

## **Housing & Environment**

Garter snakes are **active, terrestrial to semi-aquatic** species that benefit from **horizontal space, hiding spots, and enrichment**.

**Minimum enclosure size:**

* Juveniles: 20-gallon long tank
* Adults: **40-gallon or larger** recommended
* Bigger is always better to encourage activity and exploration

**Important enclosure features:**

* Escape-proof lid or doors (garter snakes are agile and slender)
* Multiple hides on both warm and cool ends
* Branches, cork bark, and rocks for climbing and exploring
* Large water dish for soaking or semi-aquatic setups

**Recommended substrates:**

* Aspen shavings (easy to spot clean, dry)
* Coconut husk or cypress mulch for moderate humidity
* Paper-based bedding for easy cleaning
* Moist sphagnum moss in hides for shedding support
* Avoid cedar or pine shavings (toxic oils)

**Cleaning guidelines:**

* Spot-clean daily to remove feces and urates
* Replace substrate fully and disinfect enclosure monthly or as needed

## **Heating & Lighting**

Garter snakes need a **temperature gradient** to regulate their metabolism and digestion.

**Temperature gradient:**

* **Basking spot:** 85–88°F
* **Cool side:** 72–78°F
* **Nighttime:** Safe to drop to ~65–72°F

**Heating:**

* Overhead halogen or incandescent bulbs for basking spots
* Under-tank heat mats (with thermostats) for belly heat
* Avoid heat rocks (burn risk)

**Lighting:**

* Garter snakes are **diurnal** and benefit from clear day/night cycles
* UVB is **not required**, but **low-level UVB (2–5%) may improve overall health**
* Provide a **12-hour light/dark cycle** with timers

## **Humidity**

Garter snakes prefer **moderate humidity levels of 40–60%**, varying slightly by species and local climate.

**Humidity management tips:**

* Light misting if needed
* Provide a **humid hide** with damp sphagnum moss, especially during shedding
* Use a **digital hygrometer** for monitoring
* Avoid excessive humidity that can promote respiratory infections

Proper humidity supports **healthy shedding** and hydration.

## **Water & Hydration**

Garter snakes often **soak in water** and need ready access to clean water.

**Water guidelines:**

* Provide a **large, sturdy water dish** deep enough for soaking
* Change water daily to avoid bacterial growth
* Clean and disinfect the water dish weekly or more often if soiled
* Many garters will defecate in the water—regular cleaning is essential

Some keepers offer **semi-aquatic sections** or tubs in the enclosure for enrichment.

## **Diet & Feeding**

Garter snakes are **carnivorous generalists** in the wild, often eating amphibians, fish, worms, and small rodents. In captivity, they can be transitioned to **appropriately sized frozen/thawed rodents**, which is safer and nutritionally balanced.

**Feeding guidelines:**

* Prey ≈ 1–1.25× the widest part of the snake’s body
* Juveniles: Feed every 4–5 days
* Adults: Feed every 5–7 days

**Food options:**

* Frozen/thawed pinky or fuzzy mice (ideal long-term staple)
* Fish (thawed whole freshwater fish, e.g., tilapia—avoid goldfish due to thiaminase risk)
* Nightcrawlers or earthworms (ensure pesticide-free)

**Feeding tips:**

* Avoid live prey to prevent injury
* Use tongs to offer prey
* Ensure a balanced diet—avoid over-reliance on fish or worms alone
* Dust fish or worms with calcium supplement if used frequently

## **Behavior & Handling**

Garter snakes are **active, alert, and often bold**. With gentle, consistent handling, many become **tolerant of interaction**, though some remain flighty.

**Handling recommendations:**

* Wash hands before and after handling
* Support the full body, allowing free movement
* Avoid sudden movements that may startle
* Start with short, calm sessions to build trust
* Avoid handling right after feeding

Some garter snakes may **defecate or musk** when frightened—this often decreases with regular, gentle handling.

## **Healthcare & Veterinary Care**

Schedule an **initial veterinary exam** after acquisition and plan for **annual wellness checkups** with a reptile-experienced veterinarian.

**Common health issues:**

* Respiratory infections (from poor temps or humidity)
* Internal parasites (especially wild-caught or improperly sourced)
* External parasites (mites)
* Shedding problems (dysecdysis)
* Regurgitation (often from feeding too large or handling after feeding)

**Warning signs:**

* Lethargy or weakness
* Persistent refusal to eat
* Wheezing, open-mouth breathing, nasal discharge
* Retained shed, especially around the eyes
* Swelling or lesions in the mouth
* Abnormal weight loss

Early veterinary care improves outcomes and can **prevent serious complications**.

## **Enrichment & Habitat Design**

Garter snakes are **naturally curious and active**, thriving in **complex environments**.

**Enrichment strategies:**

* Multiple hides for security on both warm and cool sides
* Branches, rocks, and driftwood for climbing and exploration
* Large water basin or semi-aquatic section
* Varied textures and décor
* Rearrange elements periodically to encourage exploration

A dynamic enclosure supports **natural behaviors** and reduces stress.

## **Facts & FAQs**

* Named for their **long, thin stripes** resembling garters (stockings).
* Diurnal hunters with **keen vision and active foraging behavior**.
* Mildly venomous (Duvernoy’s glands), but **harmless to humans**.
* Wide native range across **North America**, adapting to diverse habitats.
* Lifespan of **8–15 years** in captivity with good care.

### **Supplies & Care Checklist**

* Escape-proof enclosure (≥40 gallons for adults)
* Under-tank heat mat with thermostat
* Overhead basking bulb or ceramic heater
* Digital thermometers and hygrometer
* Multiple hides (warm and cool sides)
* Branches, cork bark, rocks for climbing
* Deep, stable water basin for soaking
* Appropriate substrate (aspen, coconut husk, paper-based)
* Tongs for safe feeding
* Frozen/thawed appropriately sized rodents or other prey
* Cleaning supplies and reptile-safe disinfectants
* Secure carrier for veterinary visits

*Yarmouth Veterinary Center*