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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

by Paul J. Pugliese

“For Goodness *Snakes*: Spring is Almost Here!”

Snakes are most active at dawn and dusk between March and October. Outside temperatures affect the activity of snakes. Because they cannot generate their own body heat like mammals, snakes remain relatively inactive when it is cold. However, as spring approaches, these fascinating reptiles begin to come out of their winter hibernation and our Extension office usually gets an increase of frantic calls on the subject. Usually, the caller wants to know how to keep snakes out of their yard—permanently!

No other creatures provoke such simultaneous conflicting feelings as do snakes. We are at once attracted and repelled, intrigued by them and their habits and, at the same time, certain people are seized by an almost overwhelming urge to kill. As with any wild animal, caution is advised. Homeowners, hikers, hunters, children and others should not approach or threaten any wild animal, and snakes are no exception.

A major reason many fear snakes is that *some* are venomous. Of the more than 40 kinds in Georgia, however, only 6 species are venomous. The two most commonly seen venomous species in Cherokee County are Copperheads and Timber Rattlesnakes. Other venomous snakes include Cottonmouths and Pygmy Rattlesnakes which are reportedly found only on rare occasions in this part of Georgia. Coral snakes and Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnakes are generally only found south of Macon in Georgia.

Fortunately, snake bites are rare accidents. Fewer people are killed by snakes than by lightning. The probability of dying in a car accident far exceeds the chance of ever being bitten by a venomous snake. Also, as many as half of all bites by venomous snakes are mild or “dry” bites in which little or no venom is injected. More than half of U.S. snakebite victims were bitten while handling the snake, and more than two-thirds saw the snake before being bitten—usually in an attempt to kill, capture, or harass it.

The best defense is knowledge; learn to recognize venomous species (and this is easy considering that you only need to recognize two local species). *Snakes of Georgia and South Carolina* is a good reference for snake identification. This publication can be viewed online for free at www.uga.edu/srelherp/snakes .

Snakes feed on a wide variety of small creatures and are very particular about what they eat. Some species eat only warm-blooded animals such as rodents and birds. Others may eat only toads and frogs. Aquatic snakes feed primarily on fish and amphibians. Small snakes are likely to eat mice, frogs, toads, earthworms, slugs and soft-bodied insects. Thus snakes are part of the natural system. Note that humans are not on the menu for snakes! Many of the things snakes eat are considered pests, so knowledgeable people spare harmless snakes that live in their yards.

Venomous snakes are another matter. In most circumstances, they should be removed. Be careful — a snake can strike half its length or more. Even when the snake is dead, its reflex movement can result in a bite if handled carelessly. Bites by venomous snakes need prompt medical attention. The bites of non-venomous species can be treated with soap, water and antiseptic. Refer venomous snakes in buildings to the Wildlife Resources Division of the Department of Natural Resources. Most people are bitten when they try to kill a snake. This only causes the snake to defend itself the only way it can.

Any non-venomous snake can be safely removed from a building by using a long-handled broom to gently brush the animal into an empty trash can. Place the lid on the can and take the snake to a wooded area away

from any homes and carefully release it. Keep in mind that most non-venomous snakes in Georgia are protected species and therefore should not be killed.

What attracts snakes to dwellings? If the house is surrounded by natural countryside with rock piles, streams and swamps nearby, snakes will appear from time to time. Naturalistic landscaping, rock gardens, weedy places, piles of boards and debris, deteriorating outbuildings and other similar things may harbor snakes. Since there are no registered chemical poisons or effective repellents that provide permanent snake control, the best way to make yards and outbuildings unattractive to snakes is to clean up and clean out. Snakes cannot hear sound, so auditory repellents are also ineffective.

The first step is to ensure that there are no openings in dwellings or other structures where snakes can enter. Since snakes can get through very small holes (about the size of a dime), a careful inspection is necessary. At the same time you are keeping snakes out of the house, take steps to make the rest of the premises unattractive. Look at the surroundings as if you were a snake. Are there rodents or other sources of food? Are there places to hide? If the answers are "yes," plan a program to remove food and cover. Keep shrubbery clean and free of debris. Keep lawns closely mowed. Fill unwanted depressions. Remove brush and leaf piles. Control rodents if they are present.

These practices will reduce but not eliminate the possibility of finding snakes. Remember, it is best to remove items that a snake would find attractive, which is the best long-term snake control solution. Enjoy the presence of snakes by observing them from a safe distance. They are highly evolved predators that have an important, natural role in the environment. Also remember that the vast majority are secretive, harmless to humans, and beneficial in controlling mice, insects and other pests.

Paul Pugliese is the Agriculture & Natural Resources Extension Agent for Cherokee County Cooperative Extension, a partnership of The University of Georgia, The U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Cherokee County. (770) 479-0418. For more information, go to our website at www.ugaextension.com/cherokee