

Garden Safety - Snakes in the Grass, Literally

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For Print October 19, 2011

Gardening is by no means an extreme sport, but like any other recreational activity you should always be aware of the risks for yourself and anyone else involved. A recent close encounter with a rattlesnake in my garden, thankfully only close for my toddler but not so for the dog, has made me reassess the safety of my favorite hobby.

Rattlesnakes, such as the Northern Pacific rattlesnake, are the only native venomous snake in Northern California and generally keep to themselves. They will strike when threatened or provoked, otherwise, if you give them room, they will retreat. Bites usually occur when the snakes are handled or accidentally touched by people, such as while walking or hiking. According to the California Poison Control Center, more than 800 people are bitten by rattlesnakes every year, usually between April and October; bites are rarely fatal if treated promptly. About 20 to 30 percent of bites are dry (no venom injected) but even so, in adults the bite can cause local tissue damage and need to be treated; children can have more severe symptoms since they are smaller.

Rattlesnakes have a heavy body, a blunt tail with one or more rattle, a triangular-shaped head that is broader at the back and a neck-like region. They prefer wild, undeveloped areas so take care when hiking; wear hiking boots and long pants and do not put your hands or step when you cannot see. They like to crawl along edges, such as the side of a house or raised garden bed, where they are protected on one side so be cautious stepping over doorways and logs.

To prevent rattlesnake encounters in your yard or garden, remove piles of rocks, wood and other debris that could harbor snakes; do so carefully in case a snake has already taken up residence there. A rattlesnake proof fence can be installed, a solid or less than one-quarter inch mesh three feet high, buried a few inches and angled outward about 30 degrees. These are expensive and require much maintenance but are quite effective. Encourage natural competitors of the rattlesnake, such as gopher snakes and racers, as well as kingsnakes, which kill and eat rattlesnakes; these are non-venomous.

If you encounter a rattlesnake, stop and slowly back away, giving the snake room to depart. Teach children to respect all snakes and to leave them alone; children are naturally curious and will try to pick them up. If you are bitten by a rattlesnake, first and foremost remain calm! Wash the area with soap and water and go to the nearest medical facility for treatment. Dogs and other domestic animals are often bitten by rattlesnakes, usually on the muzzle or tongue. If bitten they should be taken to a veterinarian immediately; they may be treated with antivenin (a.k.a. antivenom) and hospitalized for monitoring. A vaccine is available for dogs and horses that stimulates the generation of antibodies against the snake's venom. According to one vaccine manufacturer's website, vaccinated dogs and horses bitten by a rattlesnake reportedly experienced less pain and

had reduced risk of permanent injury. It is important to note that this vaccine is not completely protective; all rattlesnake bites need to be treated.

Our dog was treated for the bite on her muzzle and she has recovered well. It will take me quite a bit longer to recover from losing my perceived infallibility in the garden, but this experience has provided a valuable learning opportunity for our entire family. Indeed, this is an important lesson for anyone living and playing in the El Dorado County area. Safe gardening!

Saturday, October 22, Master Gardeners will present a free, three-hour class on “Plant Propagation. Learn different methods of propagating plants including which plants are best propagated by germinating seeds, taking divisions or by cuttings. The class starts at 9:00 a.m. and is held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Drive in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.org/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.