



by Carol Seminara, HCMG

## Snakes in the Garden

Not since the movie “Snakes on a Plane” has there been a more on-the-nose title.

Originally I was planning to write about herbs -- Did you know that dill is this year’s International Herb Association herb of the year? -- but a couple of days ago I received an e-mail with the harrowing subject line “Snake Warning!” detailing the story of a local woman’s encounter with, yes, a snake in the garden.

Before we go any further, let’s stop for a moment, take a deep breath, and consider the topic. Snakes are one of those creatures that engender deep-seated, instinctual reactions. We either love ‘em or hate ‘em, but mostly we fear them.

A little like we used to feel about bats.

Then we learned the beneficial contributions bats make to our environment by eating insects (one bat can eat more than a thousand insects per hour) and pollinating plants (they are the primary pollinators of the agave plant -- think tequilla) and giant saguaro cactus (state plant of Arizona). So, while it’s a bad idea to rush out and cuddle one, we recognize the bat’s importance to our ecosystem. They are valuable wildlife, useful members of the natural world.

Snakes are reptiles, and are poikilotherms, or cold-blooded vertebrates, which means they have no internal means of controlling their body’s temperature and are reliant on the environment. This is one reason we sometimes see snakes lying on rocks in the sun; they are trying to warm themselves up.

Like bats, snakes have a job to do and they’re good at it, too. Snakes are carnivorous predators. Because they have no legs, they move quietly and quickly, creating no noise and causing no damage to plants or their environment. They hunt down and eat common pests that none of us want in our gardens, prey such as snails, slugs, grasshoppers, gophers and mice.

One note, because snakes are not particularly discerning in their diet, they can also eat some of our beneficial critters including earthworms, toads, lizards, birds and the koi in our ponds. Another mark in their “against” column.

Most common garden snakes are adept at hiding through camouflage and avoidance. Snakes are non-aggressive; truly they are as afraid of you as you are of them and would prefer getting away than attacking. They won’t bite unless stepped on, forced into a corner or threatened with injury.

Or picked up.

It is never, ever a good idea to pick one up a snake no matter how small or seemingly benign it appears. Seriously. Even the relatively mild-mannered Garter snake can and will bite you if it’s threatened.

Best bet with garden snakes is to let them be.

There are, however, poisonous snakes that, along with their good deeds – eating mice and snails, blah blah – can and do present a very real hazard to pets and you. It’s not that they are particularly aggressive, but because their venom contains powerful hemotoxins that can cause tissue damage, hemorrhaging and a sudden, severe drop in blood pressure.

Now, back to our local gardener and her recent adventure.

A resident of Kerrville who lives in a hilltop community noted for its lovely homes and long-range scenic vistas was involved in her yard’s spring clean-up, pruning some overgrown rosemary shrubs at the end of her driveway, when she picked up a branch and discovered a Western Diamondback Rattlesnake.

In her own words, “When I picked up a branch on the ground to prune, I saw it [the snake] move. Luckily for me it was getting ready to shed it’s skin (that’s why it’s eyes are cloudy) and couldn’t see too well. But it was MAD! It is just a baby (18 inches long) and had two rattles which you couldn’t hear.”

This experienced gardener and smart gal did the right thing by calling Animal Control, who identified it as a female and removed the snake, ostensibly for release “someplace away from human habitation.”

“So be careful where you put your hands,” she advises. “I’m going to lift up branches on the ground with something before I prune or at least shake the bushes and keep my eyes open. I advise all to do the same!”

What we can take away from this gardener’s experiences, along with our respect for her level-headed conduct, is a reminder that our landscapes, no matter how well groomed, are still part of the natural world. And that snakes, along with butterflies and native plants, are a part of the ecosystem of the Texas Hill Country and deserve a place at the table.

It’s our responsibility to educate ourselves about the local flora and fauna, and to remain vigilant of our surroundings.

Happily, no person or snake was harmed in the telling of this story. And that’s good for everyone.