

Friday's Feature**By****Theresa Friday**

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Snakes stealthily slither nearby

I'm a noisy gardener. I try to be as loud as possible to chase away any wildlife that might be lurking around. So, it's a bit surprising that I've had several close encounters recently. Not with aliens but with snakes, including a sighting in my garage.

An increase in the number of snakes in the landscape is to be expected. While the human population increases and native habitats decrease, wildlife is being squeezed out of their natural areas. This often leaves our landscapes as the last remaining green spaces.

Despite the fear that many people experience when they encounter a snake, there is absolutely no cause for alarm when the encounter involves a harmless, non-venomous snake. Fortunately, most encounters between people and snakes in residential areas involve one of Florida's 39 native species of non-venomous snakes. Despite the high diversity of harmless snakes in Florida, many of these species do not thrive in residential areas, and of those that do, some are very secretive and are rarely seen by people.

There are only a few venomous snakes in Florida; therefore, there are far fewer encounters. The overall risk of a dangerous snake bite is very small.

According to Dr. Steve Johnson, University of Florida, snakes play important roles in Florida's ecosystems and help to control rats and even other snakes. Some non-venomous species, like the Eastern Indigo Snake and kingsnakes, eat venomous snakes! Snakes also serve as important prey for birds and other animals.



Several species of Florida's snakes are now considered threatened or endangered. Even the commonly seen species that seem to thrive in urban areas are at risk of being killed by pets, lawnmowers, vehicles, or residents who are unfamiliar with Florida's snakes.

But, to keep most people from experiencing a frightening encounter, there are some simple steps you can

take to coexist safely with snakes.

First, be sure to learn the common snakes in your area. While I did take a big gasp at the sight of the snake in my garage, I quickly knew it was a harmless black racer and was probably more frightened by our encounter than I was.

Secondly, “snake-proof” your yard. Eliminate hiding spaces like tall grass or debris piles. Piles of firewood should be moved away from highly traveled areas, and should be stored neatly on a rack, rather than on the ground.

Thirdly, “snake-proof” your home and other structures. Inspect your home for openings that might allow snakes to enter. Small snakes only need a pencil-size opening to enter your home. For more information, visit the University of Florida publication on “Dealing with Snakes in Florida’s Residential Areas” at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW260>.

Lastly, establish an emergency plan for the unlikely event that a resident, child, or pet is bitten by a venomous snake.

Snakes, while frightening to some people, serve an important ecological role. Remember, given the opportunity, snakes will usually flee. The best thing is to leave snakes alone. You should not be afraid of snakes. You need to respect them and give them their space.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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