

Snake in the Garden

Every once in a while, I host “The Ladies’ Luncheon” for half-a-dozen of the neighborhood women whom I like. Last time, one of the ladies told the story of a rattlesnake getting into her back yard. She called her husband, he came home from work and dispatched it with an ax. Not to be outdone, I related a story of my adventures in community gardening.

Back in North Carolina, my formative gardening years were spent working a plot in a community garden. It was out in the middle of nowhere, a clearing cut into a forested area accessed by a rutted dirt road. The only water was a creek at one side of the gardens. For \$25 a summer, you could get a nice 25 by 50 foot plot to put to whatever use you wanted. Oh, did I have fun. I got every seed catalogue known to man, not just the mundane Burpee and Parks, but the exotic Thompson and Morgan, and Gleckler’s Seedsmen of Metamora, Ohio (my favorite yearly photo in that one was of a “sweet six-year-old” girl holding a carrot that was bigger than she was.) I planted anything that struck my fancy and, in North Carolina, a whole lot of it grew.

Summers get hot and dry even in the humid southeast, though, so I kept a plastic, two-gallon can out at the garden for watering. This was in the days before I owned a car and darned if I was going to haul my can a couple of miles on my bike every time I went out to garden. I’d pick any bugs I could catch off my plants, then I’d walk down to the creek, throw the bugs to the fish and dip up some water.

One sunny summer day, I was sauntering down to the creek with my can stuffed with Japanese beetles. I was wearing flip-flops. I walked around a curve in the path and came face to face with one great big copperhead snake. I startled him as badly as he startled me. He hissed ferociously and struck at me. I, in my flip-flops, let loose with a yell that would have brought the cavalry had there been anyone out at the gardens but me, danced back and started swinging my watering can.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! I beat the beejeebers out of that snake. Japanese beetle flew thither and yon with every whack and my watering can started to split. The snake, realizing he’d taken on somebody bigger, uglier and considerably meaner than he was, slithered as fast as he could into the underbrush and I hightailed it in the opposite direction.

I decided the garden didn’t *really* need watering that day (besides which my can wouldn’t hold water anymore), hopped on my bike and headed home, picking a last few Japanese beetles out of my hair. Never did wear flip-flops to the garden again.

The ladies were suitably impressed and amazed that I had continued renting my snake-infested garden for a couple of years after that. “I was just startled,” I bragged, “I’m not afraid of snakes, I know how to handle them.” When my widowed, 60-something, next-door-neighbor said that she was terrified of snakes, I told her not to worry, if she ever saw one in her yard, just to call me, I’d take care of it for her...

Well, I got what I asked for. One afternoon, as I was about to head out the door to the Engineer’s office, the phone rang. It was my neighbor.

“There’s a snake in my yard. I think it’s a rattlesnake. You said I should call you.”

Mentally saying a few very unladylike words and hoping that she was mistaken in her identification, I replied, “That’s okay, let me put on my big shoes and I’ll be right over.”

I put on my big shoes – wishing sincerely that I had a pair of thigh high boots – and grabbed a shovel. The shovel with the *long* handle. I shouldered my long-handled shovel and boldly marched next door. She met me at her back gate, her face puckered with worry.

“The dogs were barking and barking, so I went out to see what was wrong. There was a snake. It had its tail in the air. I think it’s a rattlesnake. I put the dogs in. I called my son and he told me to call animal control. I was so afraid, they’re so far away, then I remembered what you said.”

I asked her how big it was. “Not too big,” she drew a circle with her hands about the size of a small dinner plate and said it was all curled up except for its head and its tail.

We cautiously approached the spot where she’d seen the snake. It wasn’t there. Holding my shovel by the end of the handle, I used it as a probe, lifting up branches, pushing aside plants.

Found it! In the back corner of the yard by the fence. Yes, it was rattlesnake, probably about three, three and a half feet long.

Now what?

In Utah, rattlesnakes are a protected species. Unless one is in the act of striking at you, it’s illegal to kill it.

My neighbor has two dogs with more enthusiasm than brains. The family on the other side has four- and seven-year-old boys. I have a year-old cat who thinks she’s a mighty hunter and I have a predilection for wearing flip-flops, not to mention a husband who has a PhD but not a whole lot of common sense. I did *not* want a poisonous snake in my back yard or any of my neighbors’. I wanted to kill it. I didn’t want to break the law, or go to jail, or to pay a fine, but I sure as heck wanted that snake gone and gone immediately.

The number to call for Snake Busters is 538-4700, Salt Lake County Wildlife Services. Unfortunately, you have to wait through the voice mail menus and the seemingly interminable hold music before you get to talk to someone who will take your report and send out the next available wildlife control officer. Meanwhile, who knows where the snake could go or what it could get up to while you wait for the men in uniform to arrive.

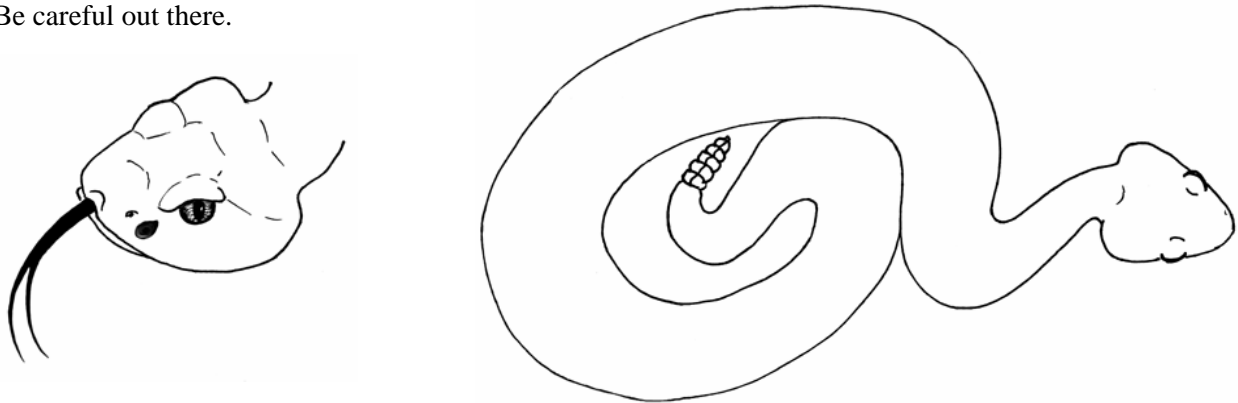
However, it being not too big a snake, me having a shovel with a long handle and my neighbor having an empty garbage can, a quick game of “can the snake” was in order. The snake was cautiously scooped and herded into the open lawn and the can clamped over top of it. Oh yeah, I made sure to grind the edges of the can deep into the grass, to put weights on top of it so that even the Arnold Schwarzenegger of snakes couldn’t lift the can, and I was extremely careful while doing it. Used the can as a shield and worked around it. Took my pulse about an hour to return to normal.

The best thing was that the wildlife guy arrived before the Engineer. My beloved would surely have had to lift up the trash can to make sure it was a rattlesnake. He is, after all, a muy macho, testosterone fueled, manly man.

All kidding aside, I do know snakes pretty well. I like them and kept non-poisonous snakes as pets when I was a kid. If this had been a large rattlesnake, one of those seven or eight foot monsters, I would never have approached it with a shovel. I would have had my neighbor call Wildlife Services while I tried to keep an eye on it from a safe distance. Never, never would I go after a snake that was longer than my shovel’s handle. A snake can strike the full length of its body; a seven foot snake can strike a target seven feet from the center of its coil. You may be bigger and smarter and maybe even meaner, but the snake is a heck of a lot faster. And potentially lethal. While it’s true that there are only, on average, about a dozen deaths due to snake bite a year in this country, it’s not a good idea to put yourself in line to be one

of that dozen. So use common sense. If you're in a brushy area, wear sturdy shoes, long pants and sleeves, gloves. Don't stick your hands and feet into places you can't see. Look before you sit. Be aware of your surroundings. If you're hiking, take a walking stick or a ski pole and let it lead the way.

Be careful out there.



Rattlesnake Identification	Treatment for Snake Bite
Wide, triangular head with definite neck Rattle on tail – usually, but not always Heavy body Usually brown or tan with darker markings Don't get close enough to see these identifiers: Fangs. Heat sensitive pits between the nostrils and the eyes. Keeled scales Vertical pupils (cat's eyes)	Get the victim to the hospital ASAP! Try to keep the victim calm and immobile. Keep bitten part below the level of the heart. Splint bitten part to keep it from moving. Remove any tight clothing or jewelry. Wash wound with soap and water. Do Not: Ice the area of the bite. Elevate it above heart level. Use a tourniquet or try to suck out the venom.