

How To: Improve your garden for reptiles



They are not common, but if you are lucky, reptiles such as lizards, snakes and slow worms can take up residence in gardens. Managing areas of your garden to attract reptiles will benefit other garden creatures too.



Lizard Photo: Ocrdu via Wikimedia Commons



Grass snake Photo: Fred Holmes



Slow worm Photo: Howard Inns

Target species:

The only [reptiles](#) likely to be found in gardens are the common lizard *Zootoca vivipara*, the slow-worm *Anguis fragilis*, and the grass snake *Natrix helvetica*. The common lizard is found throughout Britain and Ireland except offshore Scottish Islands but are generally rather more common nearer the coast than far inland. Slow worms live throughout mainland Britain but are absent from Ireland except where introduced in the beautiful Burren area of County Clare. The grass snake is only found in England and Wales, but mainly comes to gardens in rural areas.

How to do it

Habitat

- Like most garden vertebrates, reptiles and amphibians like plenty of cover, and this should be pretty dense, and with damp shady areas that attract their prey.
- Garden reptiles are “cold-blooded”, but lizards and snakes actually control their temperature behaviourally by basking in the sun to warm up. A rockery on a sunny, south-facing slope, close to areas of dense vegetation would be ideal as well as attractive. Roughly 1m square sheets of corrugated roofing are perfect for reptiles to hide under and warm up at the same time, but don't look very pretty. Slow worms do not usually bask in the sun but do like to hide under the roofing sheets. Otherwise they stay under cover in vegetation or leaf litter.
- You should avoid using pesticides that kill the small creatures that reptiles like to eat.
- Make sure there are entry points around the perimeter of your garden at ground level, like small gaps under fencing to allow free movement between gardens for reptiles (and other animals).
- Creating a log pile is a great way to attract reptiles to your garden, as log piles harbour insects they prey on and provide shelter for overwintering. Look at our guide on [habitat piles](#) for guidance. Although shaded piles are better for invertebrates, a log pile in a sunny spot will give reptiles a place to bask in the sun.

- Compost heaps and heaps of grass cuttings provide a warm shelter for lizards and slow worms, as the decomposition of organic matter generates heat. Grass snakes may even choose to lay their eggs in your heap. The compost also provides food for amphibians and reptiles by attracting insects that feed on the decaying matter. See our guide on making [compost](#).
- Long grass lets grass snakes and slow-worms move around under cover, safely hidden from predators - so cutting your grass less often and having your mower set to a higher cutting height will help.
- To get the best chance of seeing grass snakes, put in a pond. They are highly adapted to water (their scientific name *Natrix* means “swimmer”), and newts and frogs are among their most favoured food. See our guide on creating and maintaining [ponds](#) for wildlife.

Food

Encourage the creatures that reptiles like to eat:

- Lizards are fast runners and can feed on actively mobile invertebrates such as spiders and insects, but they will take slugs and snails too.
- Slow worms are – slow! and go for easier prey, especially slugs, worms, snails, spiders and insects that they find among vegetation or litter are ground level.
- Grass snakes take larger prey including fish, amphibia and mice and voles.

How easy is it to do?

Easy to moderate. log pile or rockery is relatively easy if you have the materials. Putting in a pond is much more of a task.

How much will it cost?

For your log pile, you can use trimmings from your own trees or you could ask neighbours who have had tree work done to keep some logs for you. Bituminous roofing sheets cost about £12 for a 1x2m sheet that will make at least two sun traps for reptiles.

How effective is it for the target species?

Reptiles are not common in most gardens, and you are more likely to see them in a rural garden than a city garden. If they are in your area (and slow worms are quite widely encountered) then getting the habitat and basking sites right will make it more likely you will have them.

Golden rules – what the science tells us

- Don't be afraid to share your garden with snakes - grass snakes are harmless and adders, the only venomous snake in Britain, are *very* rarely found in gardens. Reptiles are generally shy and will flee to cover when they sense you approaching, one reason why they are rarely spotted even if they are in your garden.
- Be careful when emptying compost piles, because lizards and slow worms like their bugs and heat, and grass snakes will sometimes lay eggs in them.
- If you're buying or recycling wood for your log piles, make sure you buy untreated logs with their bark on, as preservative chemicals will kill any fungi and insects that try to colonise, and many wood boring invertebrates such as beetles like to shelter beneath the bark.



What to look for?

On warm sunny days, you might see lizards basking on your rockery/log pile, or slow worms and grass snakes sliding through your long grass. If you are really lucky you might spot a grass snake in your pond!

Photo: Dave Maggs

Things to be aware of

- All reptiles are very wary, so if you have them, be very cautious in approaching them.
- Having lots of frogs encourages grass snakes as they are a favoured prey. If you are worried by grass snakes taking your frogs, remember it is in their job description to do so.
- If you suspect you might have reptiles, try the trick of leaving a square of corrugated roofing on the ground out in the sun near some likely habitat. Any reptiles which come across it will use it as a centrally heated shelter, and you can see them if you gently lift the edge.
- The wood at the bottom of your wood pile will rot down over time, so occasionally add new logs and prunings to the top of your stack.

Further information

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust [website](http://www.arc-trust.org/) www.arc-trust.org/

On our website:

Our page on garden [reptiles](http://www.wlgf.org/reptiles.html) www.wlgf.org/reptiles.html

Natural England booklet on [reptiles](http://www.wlgf.org/ne15reptiles.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ne15reptiles.pdf

Our page on garden [reptiles](http://www.wlgf.org/reptiles.html) www.wlgf.org/reptiles.html

How to: [Create and maintain ponds](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_ponds.pdf) for wildlife www.wlgf.org/ht_ponds.pdf

How to: Create [habitat piles](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_habitat_piles.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_habitat_piles.pdf