Snakes and garden netting

Why is garden netting dangerous for snakes?

Snakes sometimes become entangled in garden netting. Sadly, it's very difficult for a snake to disentangle itself. Entangled snakes often die a slow death from their injuries, exposure to the elements, and predator attacks. You can minimise the chance of this happening in your garden by following the simple advice below.

Grass snakes are by far the most commonly entangled type of snake in British gardens. Note the yellow and black "collar" markings. Photo: John Baker.

What types of netting cause problems?

The most common problems are with netting placed over ponds, and with netting protecting fruit or vegetables. Loosely secured plastic netting that has very fine strands is the most problematic. Almost any netting that has been stored on the ground poses a risk as it's an attractive hiding place for snakes, and the close bundling of strands easily traps snakes.

Less commonly, snakes can get tangled in other kinds of flexible mesh or matting, for example those used in planting schemes, erosion control and landscaping. Other animals get caught and die in garden netting too, especially hedgehogs, birds, frogs and toads.

What can I do to stop this happening?

The simplest and most effective way is to **stop using netting**. Yet this won't always be desirable, so consider the following steps to reduce the chance of snakes getting caught up in your garden netting.

(1) Safer pond protection

Use a rigid grille or grating over your pond, instead of flexible netting. There are specialist metal or rigid plastic pond grilles that can be fitted to most pond types. Some are divided into easily removable, interlocking sections to help you with pond maintenance. To find out more, visit your local garden centre, ask a garden contractor, or

This grass snake is resting on braided cord netting stretched over a pond. The taut positioning, wide mesh and thick strands mean the snake cannot get entangled. Photo: Wendy Redman.

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search the internet (suppliers include www.pondsafety.com and www.safapond.com). Otherwise, with basic DIY skills you can build one using materials commonly available from builders' merchants, such as steel mesh — see below.

An alternative is wide-meshed, braided or cord-type netting, pulled taut across the pond — see photo on front page. Make sure the "mesh size" (distance between strands) is at least 5cm, and the cord diameter at least 3mm. Suppliers include www.norfinenets.co.uk.

(2) Use safer netting and alternatives

Use safer netting whenever you can. For snakes, the worst type of netting has very fine, flexible strands, with a mesh size between about 1 and 3cm. Therefore, use netting made from thicker material, with a mesh size of at least 5cm.

Consider using chicken wire, thick plastic, plastic-coated wire or other more rigid material. If you need a fine mesh size, you could use rigid wire mesh, or if you need flexible material opt for an extremely fine mesh, say less than 0.5cm. See page 3 for safer types of netting.

(3) Move your netting

Re-position the netting so that it is at least 15cm clear of the ground. This makes it much less likely that snakes will encounter the netting, because snakes spend most time close to the ground.

(4) Tighten your netting

Keep the netting taut at all times. Snakes are more likely to get tangled in loose netting, so attach it firmly to fixed points, and regularly check it to re-tighten when necessary. Depending on exactly where your netting is, you could use pegs or twine to secure it.

(5) Store netting securely

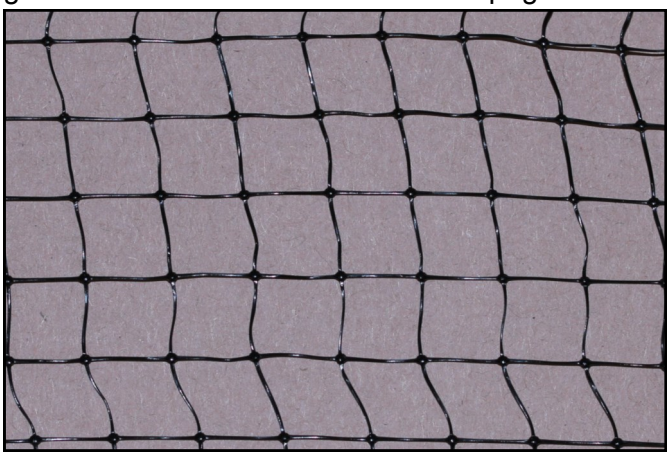
Store unused netting where snakes can't reach it, for example in a shed. Don't store netting on the ground in the open. Always safely discard old netting that can't be re-used.

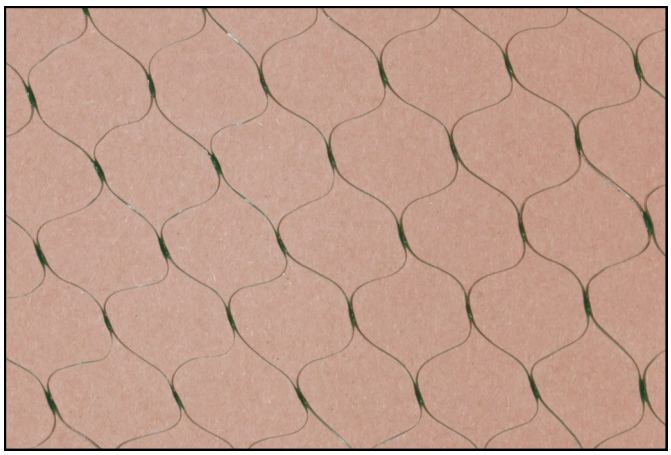
(6) Spread the word

Mention these tips to your neighbours, friends and fellow allotment holders. Many people are understandably unaware of this problem. We hear too many stories of gardeners horrified to find out too late that a snake's been caught in their netting.

Hazardous netting

Please try to **avoid these types of netting**, or at least minimise the risk of harm by following our guidance on the left hand side of this page.

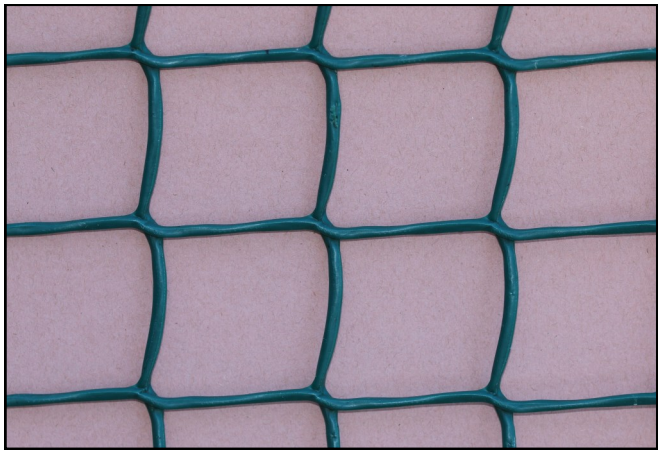




Plastic netting with a mesh size of around 2cm (top) is commonly used over ponds to deter herons or prevent leaves falling in. Netting with even finer strands, and mesh size around 2-4cm (above), is often used to protect fruit and vegetables — especially peas, beans and soft fruit. The mesh size, thin and flexible strands, and positioning mean that grass snakes are frequently trapped in these types of netting, as happened below (Photo: Chris Dresh).

Safer netting and alternatives

These types of netting are very unlikely to cause problems for snakes. In many cases you can use them instead of the hazardous netting mentioned on page 2, carrying out the same function yet without the risk to wildlife.



Mesh made from rigid plastic, or plastic-coated wire mesh (above), rarely causes entrapment. Mesh size is not so important with this type of mesh, since snakes rarely catch their scales on it. Chicken wire and the mesh used for rabbit hutches also pose little risk to snakes.

An alternative is to use netting with extremely fine mesh, less than 0.5cm, commonly used to protect against plant pests. Snakes cannot normally get entangled in this type of netting. The photo above, and close-up at top-right, shows this type of netting being used to protect a vegetable plot (Photos: Dorothy Driver). Manufacturers include www.enviromesh.co.uk.

Fleece — for protecting plants from the cold — is also normally safe for snakes.

Metal pond grilles (above) are available from larger garden centres and pose no entanglement risk to snakes. Other designs include the one pictured on the back page.

The pond above has a metal mesh that wasn't custom-designed yet still does the job. Various materials are available. You can get reinforced steel mesh (often called "re-bar" in the trade, standing for reinforced bar) from builders' merchants. Ask them to cut it to size so that it fits over your pond. Photo: Chris Dresh.

How do I free a tangled snake?

If you spot a snake caught in netting, try the following steps. You will find it easier if there are two of you, though obviously if the snake is in distress it's best to act quickly even if alone. You may want to wear disposable gloves as it can be a messy task.

Check the snake's identity. The grass snake is the species most likely to get tangled in netting. However, there is a very small chance you have found an adder, slow-worm (a legless lizard that resembles a snake), smooth snake, or an escaped pet snake. Grass snakes are easily identified by the yellow and black "collar" markings behind the head. Use our identification poster to help, or our guide for more detail. If you suspect it is an adder, you should seek specialist help (see below) as this species is venomous.

Adders seldom get entangled in netting as they're rarely found in gardens in much of Britain. The main exceptions are gardens next to nature reserves with favoured habitats, especially heathland. The unfortunate adder above was found in pea netting on an allotment, and was successfully freed by an expert. Note the distinctive bold zig-zag marking down the back. (Photo: snakesalive.co.uk)

Carefully grasp the snake, supporting its whole body if possible. This will help stop it writhing and causing further harm to itself. Do not grip too tightly, though. If the animal can be supported on the ground, it will be able to escape once you have freed it, so do this near some long grass or similar cover. If practical, loosely cover the snake's head with some fabric (e.g. a pillow case or tea towel) as the darkness may reduce stress. If it is a hot day, using damp fabric may cool the snake and further reduce stress.

Very carefully snip the netting around the snake's body using scissors (nail scissors are often best). As the snake's body is released from netting, grasp it carefully to reduce writhing. You may be able to pull the snake out of the netting, though be careful that this does not cause further constriction of its body, and beware of the scales getting caught against the netting. It's best to move snakes through netting in a forward (head-first) direction, as otherwise the scales may get snagged.

This grass snake was caught up in pea netting. The top photo shows how the scales around the neck are snagged on netting. The inset shows how to carefully snip netting away using nail scissors, whilst restraining the animal. The snake's eyes look "cloudy" here because it was about to shed its skin.

Don't be alarmed if the snake hisses or defecates; this is a common reaction under stress. Grass snakes almost never try to bite people. Even if they do, they won't harm you as they are not venomous and have tiny teeth. **Do not kill a trapped snake.** All British snakes need our help, and are in fact protected by law.

If you are not confident to disentangle the snake yourself, consider asking a friend who might be more comfortable with this. If you would like further help, try the contacts listed on page 5. Note that these organisations have limited resources and often cannot arrange visits, but they will try to assist.

Should I simply release a freed snake? If so, how?

It is best to **release the snake straightaway if it appears to be in good condition**. If you think a snake is too badly injured to release, or you would like an expert view, try the organisations listed below. If the snake has deep cuts or other signs of serious injury it will need veterinary care before release.

Be aware that grass snakes may "play dead": the snake lies motionless, sometimes on its back with the mouth open, and won't respond even when touched (see photo below). This is a natural defensive reaction. Usually the snake will return to normal activity if left undisturbed for a while. It's important to recognise this as snakes rescued alive from netting might initially appear dead.

Grass snake playing dead. This is thought to be a defensive behaviour, discouraging potential predators who would normally prefer live prey.

It's **normally best to release a snake close to where you found it**, so that it does not become disorientated. Don't release the snake on a very cold day, or if you can see a cat or other predator very close by.

If it's apparently healthy and active, you can simply release the snake next to some vegetation cover, such as a hedge, bushes or long grass. If you think it may be "playing dead" then you could put it in a cardboard box, bucket or similar, cover it loosely with some fabric, and leave it undisturbed for around an hour. This will mean the snake has a chance to become active again in a safe environment (leaving it exposed in this state might put it at risk of predator attack). Then check on the snake – hopefully it will now be active and you can release it. If you're keeping it indoors temporarily, ensure it is in a ventilated, escape-proof box in a cool place. Please take care in this case, as snakes are experts at escaping from containers, and it can take a long time to find them if they get loose in a house.

If you can place the snake somewhere you're sure is free of predators, you could leave it in a container positioned so that it can leave of its own accord, e.g. an open cardboard box turned on its side. Always check that the snake has escaped.

We're keen to know about your observations of snakes in gardens. Please take a moment to **report your snake sighting** on the "Record Pool" (www.recordpool.org.uk), an online recording system that helps us better understand reptile distributions.

Organisations which may advise further

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (the organisation producing this leaflet): a specialist charity focusing on snakes, lizards, frogs, toads and newts. Contact details on the back page.

RSPCA: www.rspca.org.uk, tel 0300 1234 555.

Scottish SPCA: www.scottishspca.org, tel 03000 999 999.

Wildlife hospitals: There are many, so we suggest you check the phone book or search online. The British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council maintains a list at bwrc.org.uk.

I'm worried about having snakes in my garden. What can I do?

Although some people are alarmed when they see a snake, in fact it's good news: British snakes have declined in number, and need our help. They are shy and normally avoid encounters with people. Many people enjoy spotting snakes in their gardens occasionally. If you are still worried, please see our Snakes in gardens leaflet.

A rigid pond grille means that snakes still have access to the pond but won't get trapped. This model has removable interlocking sections.

Many gardeners are delighted to see grass snakes take advantage of the habitats they create. You can make a real difference by managing your garden in a way that helps grass snakes, for example by leaving some grass to grow long. For more advice, see our leaflet Dragons in your garden. Using the simple steps outlined here you can minimise the risk of netting causing harm to any snakes visiting your garden, as well as helping snakes locally.

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Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (ARC) is a national wildlife charity committed to the conservation of reptiles and amphibians and the disappearing habitats on which they depend. Our vision sees amphibians and reptiles thriving in their natural habitats, and a society inspired and committed to their conservation.

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If you have any suggestions for improving this leaflet, please let us know by email at: enquiries@arc-trust.org

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