

The Gardener's Unlikely Friend

By Susan Camp

Last month legendary groundhog (*Marmota monax*) Punxsutawney Phil came out of his burrow and reportedly saw his shadow, portending six more weeks of freezing cold and snow. The tradition of Groundhog Day, according to online sources, was brought to America in the 18th century by German farmers, who predicted winter's length in their native land by observing a hedgehog or badger as it emerged from its den on Candlemas, which falls on February 2nd.

In Celtic mythology, winter's predictor was the goddess Brighid's snake, which slithered from its mound on the festival of Imbolc, the midpoint between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox. If the snake was active, winter would soon be over. If the snake returned to its lair, winter would continue.

The legend of Brighid's snake caused me to think about how we often don't appreciate our native snakes as gardeners' and farmers' helpers. Most of us have some erroneous ideas about snakes as aggressive animals, but most snakes are shy and prefer to be left alone. Every spring my husband and I are surprised by the freshly-shed skin of our old friend, the eastern ratsnake, usually adorning a hoe or rake in our potting shed.

The eastern ratsnake (*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*) ranges from the northern United States south to Florida and west as far as Texas. It is totally harmless to human beings. It was called the black ratsnake (*Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta*) until 2008 and some resources continue to refer to it by that name. Other common names include chicken snake, black snake, black racer, and pilot snake. The average length of the adult eastern ratsnake is 42 to 72 inches, according to the Virginia Herpetological Society article "Eastern Ratsnake: *Pantherophis alleghaniensis*". The longest recorded eastern ratsnake in Virginia was 79.8 inches long. Its lifespan is unknown.

While Brighid's snake surfaced in myth around February 2nd, the eastern ratsnake won't emerge from its nest until sometime between March and May. Males and females mate in late spring to early summer. The female will lay a clutch of 5 to 25 eggs that will hatch between August and September. Eggs are deposited in piles of dead leaves or mulch, hollow logs, or abandoned animal dens.

There is no difference in appearance between males and females. While the adult eastern ratsnake is shiny black with a cloudy gray underside and white chin, juvenile coloration includes brown to black blotches and a brown stripe from each eye to the mouth. A juvenile eastern ratsnake may be mistaken for a copperhead. The adult snake may be confused with the northern racer.

The body of the eastern ratsnake is muscular and shaped like a loaf of bread. Most of the time, the eastern ratsnake will flee or lie still when approached, but it can change the shape of its head when threatened in order to appear more menacing. It may coil into an S-shaped curve, hiss and attempt to strike, although it produces a negligible amount of venom. It may vibrate its tail in a bush or a pile of dead leaves to mimic a rattlesnake's rattle.

Eastern rat snakes prey on mice, voles, moles, lizards, and other small pests found in gardens, sheds, or barns. They kill by constricting their prey. They are excellent climbers and will raid nests for eggs or baby birds.

Predators of eastern ratsnakes include birds of prey, raccoons, and opossums. Humans pose the greatest threat to ratsnakes and their habitats. According to the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) article "Managing Wildlife Damage: Snakes", it is illegal to kill any species of snake in Virginia, unless it poses an imminent danger to humans. The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries article "Eastern Ratsnake (*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*)" provides further information about characteristics and habitat.

If you are tempted to deposit a newly caught eastern ratsnake in your neighbor's garden, remember that he will reap the benefits of having this predator patrol his flower and vegetable plots.

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