

Garden Good Guys – Lizards

By Nanette Londeree

“I am so shocked and scared... are lizards harmful to the flowers? Today I almost fainted when I saw it. Please help me - how to get rid of it or shall I get rid of it. Thanks,” said the blogger on a popular garden website after seeing one of those little four-legged reptilian helpers scurrying around her garden. “No. Lizards are not bad. They eat other bugs;” “Lizards are wonderful in the garden. They eat bugs and are generally harmless;” and “Lizards are all over my rose garden and I welcome them. Please don't be scared of them or get rid of it because they eat bugs. The lizard is more scared of you-trust me!” were some of the knowledgeable replies. All correct. And sad but true, many people believe that lizards are bad guys. Unless you've got oodles of them roaming around inside your home or garage, nothing is further from the truth. Lizards are definitely garden good guys.

With over 3000 species worldwide and sixty in California, lizards are the most abundant reptiles living in every part of the world but Antarctica. (The southwestern desert Gila monster is the only poisonous lizard in the United States.) These garden inhabitants are easy to identify with their dry, scaly skin, four legs with clawed feet, and long tail. The olive, brown or black critters with patterns of paired blotches, wavy cross bars or stripes down the back, are generally six – nine inches long and are often seen basking in warm, sunny places or scampering around rocks, brush piles or other small, confined areas, fences and buildings. Not to be confused with salamanders; lizards are more closely related to snakes, while salamanders are amphibians like frogs.

Some lizards munch on plants (they don't do much damage), though most dine on insects, predominantly ants, aphids, beetles, grasshoppers, wasps and spiders. They find their food visually through movement. And while they're good insectivores, they're also the favored meal of raptors and other birds, carnivorous mammals, snakes, and even other lizards. They have a fragile, detachable tail, that, when threatened, they can drop. The off-loaded tail continues to wiggle, deflecting attention from the predators, while the lizard runs off to safety. Most will re-grow their tail over time.

The western fence lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis*) is one of the speediest, and most easily seen during its active period April to October. They lay three to twenty cream-colored soft-shelled eggs in damp soil between May and August, and the young hatching July through September. Being cold-blooded, they hibernate during winter months.



If you're fortunate enough to have these creatures in your garden, watch for one to come out into the open and start doing push-ups – yes, like a new soldier at boot-camp, bursts of rapid ups and downs. Supposedly this is a form of communication between them, behavior comparable to birds chirping. Quite amusing to watch.

So if you spy these bug-eaters in your garden don't shrink away and faint; welcome them - they're a gardens really good guys.