

# Creating a home for lizards

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A rustling in the garden may mean that a reptile is about, looking for a sunny spot or foraging for food. Lizards are welcome visitors in gardens, where they will feed on plants, slugs, and bugs.

## Lizards of South Australia

South Australia is home to approximately 180 lizard species, with new species still being discovered.

There are 4 families of lizards in South Australia:

1. dragons, with 37 species
2. geckos (approx. 30 species) and legless lizards (approx. 18 species)
3. skinks, the largest family with almost 90 species
4. goannas, with 8 species.

Several species of lizards have lost much of their natural habitat and are threatened with extinction in South Australia. These include the aptly named pygmy bluetongue skink and the much larger Rosenberg's goanna.

Some lizards, like the larger bluetongue skinks, are commonly found in Adelaide gardens where there are rocks, open drains or piles of timber to provide them with shelter.

They live on or near the ground, feeding on a variety of invertebrates, including snails, which they find in leaf litter and amongst groundcover plants. They also eat plant material, especially flowers and fruits like cape weed and strawberries.

Another common suburban lizard is the marbled gecko, a small grey tree-living gecko which loves to hunt spiders and insects on the walls of houses on warm evenings. These geckos also like to hide during the day under loose bark on trees, old sheets of iron, stacks of bricks or pavers and wooden sleepers.

A number of lizard species are threatened within the Adelaide metropolitan area, such as the five-lined earless dragon, painted dragon and Cunningham's skinks.



*Shingleback lizard (Photo: Martin Stokes).*

## Threats

The main threat to lizards is habitat loss through urban development. A trend toward manicured gardens and cleared spaces has led to a decrease in the availability of shelter, habitat, and food resources.

Another major impact on lizard populations is predation by introduced animals including rats, cats, dogs, foxes and blackbirds, which are efficient predators of the smaller skinks. Cats left to roam outside can be particularly detrimental to lizard populations.

## Habitat requirements

Lizards need debris that provides camouflage, shelter from the elements and refuge from predators. Leaving a good supply of leaves and twigs on the ground also provides habitat for the insects and other small creatures that lizards eat. Leaf litter will attract microorganisms that improve soil condition, act as a weed control, and help the soil to retain moisture by reducing evaporation.

A lizard's blood temperature is determined by its environment, so they rely on heat from the sun to warm up and become active. Incorporate flat, sustainably sourced, rocks into your garden landscape in places where they can be warmed by the sun. Make sure some shelter is near, so that sunning lizards can retreat if in danger.

Refuges can be created by elevating rocks slightly or putting them in a pile so the lizard can slip under if threatened. Hollow logs, crevices between bricks and rocks, groundcover plants and native grasses offer protection and a place to hibernate during the winter months.

## Water

Lizards get much of their water from their food and have very efficient bodies that lose little moisture through their skin. However, they will drink if water is available, especially in hot weather.

Be sure to provide a means of escape (such as a partially submerged log or rock) from your ponds, pool and even large water bowls to prevent lizards that fall in from drowning.

## Chemical Use

The lizards in your garden are a natural pest control because they will happily eat pesky slugs, snails and a variety of insects that love to munch on your garden. Avoid using pesticides, especially snail pellets, because snails that have consumed poison will be harmful to any lizard that eats them.

## Did you know?

Sleepy lizards, also known as stumpy-tail skinks or shinglebacks, live solitary lives when not breeding. Year after year they pair up with the same mate each spring to breed. They give birth to one or two young, which can weigh as much as 35% of the adult's body weight. An equivalent human baby would weigh 50 pounds (23 kg)!

Cunningham's skink is a lesser-known large spiny lizard with a long spiky tail. Colour varies from dark brown to almost black, with variable patterns including flecking and stripes. It is a vulnerable species in Adelaide, so we need to reduce habitat loss and protect it from introduced predators if we want it to survive in our region.

Geckos are distinguished from other kinds of lizards by their distinct finger and toe pads used for climbing. They are usually active at night, especially during the hours after sunset. Geckos lay eggs with hard shells – usually at communal sites in early summer.

## Wildlife friendly gardening

Gardening is a popular pastime, and what we do in our home gardens has the potential to benefit or harm the natural environment.



*Tawny dragon (Photo: Martin Stokes).*

By developing and maintaining a garden that follows the 5 basic wildlife friendly gardening principles, you will reduce your maintenance costs, the threat of invasive environmental weeds, and contribute to a better local environment with habitat that helps to conserve our local flora and fauna.

## Top 5 tips

1. Use plants native to your suburb.
2. Plant species that are a range of heights.
3. Use a mix of local native plants that fruit and flower throughout the year.
4. Manage your pets responsibly.
5. Minimise chemical use.

Together we can create a cooler, greener, wilder Adelaide.

Scan to discover a range of gardening resources, including a list of native plant nurseries, on the Green Adelaide website.



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