

‘Myth’-Information about Spiders, A Gardener’s Friend

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Eight legs surrounded by mystery and myth

Myth: Spiders are insects, right? They creep and crawl, catch and eat other insects. They’re clearly not birds or worms.

Reality: Let’s look at the scientific names for these creatures. Spiders belong to the Class Arachnida, insects to the Class Insecta. Arachnids are as far removed from insects as birds are from fish. That’s an easier distinction, since some birds swim, but few fish fly; spiders and insects are usually found in the same terrestrial locations.

Myth: OK, so all Arachnids are spiders.

Reality: Not so fast! All spiders are Arachnids, but not all Arachnids are spiders. There are eleven orders of arachnids, including scorpions, mites and ticks, and spiders.

The Greek word for spider is “arachne.” In ancient Greek mythology, Arachne was a human weaver who boasted that her work was superior to tapestries woven by the goddesses. Not being fond of mortal competition, the goddesses turned Arachne into a spider, whose descendants now weave webs to catch and eat insects.

Myth: All spiders weave webs.

Reality: Hunting or wandering spiders eschew silk nets to capture prey, relying instead on their quickness and relatively good eyesight for rounding up the next meal. Web-building spiders live in or near their web, waiting for dinner to arrive. They generally have poor eyesight, relying on sensing vibrations in their web to detect prey.



A garden spider patrols its web hoping a juicy fly tangles itself in the arachnid’s domain this morning. This leggy predator makes its home in the Discovery Garden at the Washington State University research station west of Mount Vernon. Not all spiders build webs, but those that do generally have poor eyesight. **Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald**

Myth: Late summer always brings a big explosion in the spider population.

Reality: I believed this myth for years, because of the few omnipresent whose presence heralds the shortening days of late summer. A few large, conspicuous spider species (including the larger orbweavers and the giant house spiders) are mature at this time. Webs of the Larger Orbweavers, bejeweled with pendants of morning dew, stretch among shrubs and between trees.



Myth: All spiders are poisonous. **Reality:** Most spiders are venomous to insects, not humans.
Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

Myth: All spiders are poisonous.

Reality: Most spiders are venomous, injecting poison as they bite into their prey – which is limited to insects, not humans. We are much too big for spiders to consume, especially if they're limiting their fat intake.

While we know of around 50,000 species of spiders, only about 25 have venom capable of causing illness in humans. Ravenous, human-killing spiders are Hollywood creations, not found outside of a flat screen.

That's not to say that all spider bites are harmless. In the northwest, we should avoid the Western Black Widow and the Hobo spider. According to the WSU Clark County Extension Service, "Black widow spiders are most commonly found in dry, undisturbed piles of wood, old lumber, dry crawl spaces, outbuildings, rock piles or hay bales. Black widows are shy creatures and bite only reluctantly when disturbed. Females protecting an egg sac may be slightly more aggressive. Bites...cause little pain and may go unnoticed at first. Slight swelling and reddening at the site is followed by intense muscular pain, rigidity of the abdomen and legs, difficulty breathing and nausea. If a bite is suspected, consult a doctor as soon as possible. Gardeners can protect themselves...by wearing gloves and long sleeved clothing when entering areas where black widows may be living or when handling firewood...undisturbed piles of rocks, lumber or debris."

The same precautions are recommended for protection from the hobo spider, which are relatively large, 1 to 1 ¾ inches long including legs. Hobo spiders are most commonly found in basements, on windowsills, the ground or lower floors of homes. They are most abundant from mid-July through fall, when males look for mates. Bites commonly occur when spiders are trapped against the skin in an article of clothing, or when someone picks up firewood. The initial bite is not painful, but may produce a slight prickling sensation. Within 30 minutes, a small hard area forms at the site, surrounded by an expanding reddening area. Within 15 to 35 hours blisters will form. The blisters then break within

24 hours creating a very obvious wound that oozes before a scab forms over the ulcer. Hobo spider bites are slow to heal and often leave an indented scar. If a hobo spider bite is suspected, seek medical care promptly.”

Myth: Hobo spiders are also called aggressive house spiders because they attack without provocation.

Reality: Amy Dreves, an entomologist at Oregon State University, says, “It does not bite without clear provocation and does not chase people down and attack them. Although the hobo is not aggressive, venom from its bite can cause local tissue blistering and lesion scarring damage, and may take months to heal.”

Myth: People who scoop up spiders into a cup and relocate them outdoors are crazy/ridiculous/wasting their time/obviously not scared of spiders.

Reality: We may be ridiculous, and perhaps a few of us are crazy, but we’re only making up for all the people who poison or stomp on any spider they see, indoors or out. Some of us rescue spiders even if they make us nervous, because it’s kinder to move a small, unwelcome intruder than to kill it. Many spiders kill flies, mosquitoes, moths, and other insect pests. I’d rather have spiders in my garden than mosquitoes, wouldn’t you?

Resources:

- Burke Museum ‘Spider Myths’ by Rod Crawford, Curator of Arachnids:
www.burkemuseum.org/spidermyth/myths/general.html
- “Spiders, A Gardener’s Friend,” WSU Clark County Extension Service:
http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm_tips/Spiders.html
- “Insects and Gardens: In Pursuit of a Garden Ecology,” by Eric Grissel, Timber Press, 2006.