

Spiders: A Gardener's Friend

Imagine a beautiful day in the garden. The sun is shining. The flowers are blooming. All is well. Suddenly, the gardener rounds a corner and sees it: a large yellow and black spider resting on a web stretched between two plants. A fearful thought pops to mind: Is it dangerous?

The Garden Spider

Rather than a deadly foe, the gardener has just encountered a friend – the garden spider. Like most of the 3,000 species of spiders in North America, the garden spider is harmful only to the insects it feeds upon.

Spiders, called arachnids, are distinguished from other insects by a two-segmented body, four sets of jointed legs and hard outer skeleton. Spiders have no wings or antennae but do have sharply pointed jaws called fangs.

All spiders are predators. They attack and subdue their prey by biting with their fangs and injecting poison. As predators of many garden pests, spiders are beneficial to the gardener.

Few Pose Danger

All spiders have venom, but only a handful of spider species pose any threat to humans. Of those, only two reside in the Pacific Northwest – the western black widow and the hobo spider, sometimes called the aggressive house spider.

A third spider, the brown recluse, has only been recorded once in the Pacific Northwest after it arrived inside a trailer of household goods from Kansas in 1978. Because bites from the hobo spider and brown recluse spider have similar symptoms and the spiders have a similar appearance, hobo spider bites may be mistakenly attributed to the brown recluse.

Occasional bites from tarantula and scorpion spiders kept as pets have also been recorded. However, these are not spiders people would encounter in the wild or yards in our area.

Gardeners can protect themselves – and spare the lives of harmless, helpful spiders – by learning how to identify black widow and hobo spiders and the conditions where they may be found.

The Black Widow

The appearance of the western black widow differs from male to female. Adult females are a velvety jet black and often have two reddish markings on the abdomen resembling an hourglass. The spiders measure about 1 ½ inches in diameter including the legs. Males and immature widows are typically smaller and may be yellow or white. The bite of the adult female is more toxic than that of the males or juveniles.

Black widow spiders are most commonly found in dry, undisturbed piles of wood, old lumber, dry crawl spaces, outbuildings, rock piles or bales of hay. Black widows are shy creatures and bite only reluctantly when disturbed. Females protecting an egg sac may be slightly more aggressive.

Bites from black widow spiders 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 from potential black widow bites by wearing gloves and long sleeved clothing when entering areas where black widows may be living or when handling firewood and when working in areas with undisturbed piles of rocks, lumber or debris.

The Hobo Spider

Hobo spiders, or aggressive house spiders, are one of the most common spiders found inside homes in the Pacific Northwest. The brown spiders are relatively large, measuring 1 to 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches including legs, and run swiftly.

Hobo spiders are most commonly found in basements, on windowsills, the ground or lower floors of homes. The hobo is called, "the aggressive house spider" because it bites with little provocation. Hobo spiders are most abundant from mid-July through fall, when males tend to wander looking for mates.

Bites commonly occur when spiders are squeezed against the body, picking up firewood for instance, or when trapped against the skin in an article of clothing.

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.

Gardeners can protect themselves by sealing cracks around windows, doors and pipes in their homes where hobo spiders may enter. Examine firewood and clothing for hobo spiders and watch for their presence on windowsills and in basements. If small numbers are present, they may be controlled manually.

If large numbers of hobo spiders are present in a dwelling, chemical control measures may be needed. Chemical recommendations can be obtained from the [Pacific Northwest Insect Control Handbook](#) at the extension office or online. Chemicals should be used as directed, and are best applied along baseboards, door casements, and corners where spiders are present.

While spiders may never rank high on the gardener's list of favorite wildlife, remembering that most pose no threat and knowing how to identify those that do can allow spiders and gardeners to peacefully co-exist and share the task of controlling unwanted garden pests.

Resources

[Spiders](#), Washington State University Extension Service, EB 1548, September 1997. Good photos.

[Hobo spiders search for mates in the fall](#), Oregon State University Extension, December 2008

[Frequently Asked Questions About Spiders](#), Washington State University Extension Service Puyallup. More photos.

[Necrotic Arachnidism--Pacific Northwest, 1988-1996](#), Centers for Disease Control, May 1996