

Spiders

How many times have you gone into your garden to weed or prune, and you look up and see a large spider on a web stretched between two branches of a shrub right in front of you. You may have thought, “Is it dangerous?”

Garden Spiders

Most of the time, the gardener has just encountered a friend – the garden spider. As with most of the 3,000 species of spiders in North America, the garden spider is harmful only to the insects it preys 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 their prey and subdue them with their fangs, injecting poison. As predators of many garden pests, spiders are beneficial to the gardener.

Few Pose Danger

While all spiders have venom, only a few spider species pose any threat to humans. Only two of those species reside in the Pacific Northwest – the western black widow and the hobo spider, sometimes known as the aggressive house spider.

A third spider, the brown recluse, has only been recorded once in the Pacific Northwest. It apparently arrived in a trailer of household goods from Kansas in 1978. The brown recluse is a dull brown spider about the same size as the black widow, but has a mark shaped like a violin, in darker brown, on its back. Because the bite of the hobo spider and the brown recluse have similar symptoms, and the spiders have a similar appearance, hobo spider bites may be mistakenly attributed to the brown recluse.

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

The Black Widow

Male and female black widow spiders differ in appearance. Adult females are velvety jet black and often have two reddish markings on the abdomen that look like an hourglass. The spiders measure about 1 ½ inches in diameter including the legs. Males and immature females are smaller and may be yellow or white. The bite of the adult female is more toxic than that of the males or juveniles.

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

Bites from the black widow spider cause little pain and may go unnoticed at first. Some swelling and reddening at the site is followed by intense muscular pain, rigidity of the abdomen and legs, some difficulty breathing and nausea. If a bite is suspected, consult a physician as soon as possible.

Gardeners can protect themselves from potential bites by wearing gloves and long-sleeved clothing when working in areas where black widow spiders may be living, or when handling firewood.

The Hobo Spider

Hobo spiders, also known as aggressive house spiders, are one of the most common spiders found inside homes in the Pacific Northwest. They are brown in color, and relatively large, measuring 1 to 1 ¼ inches in diameter including legs, and they run swiftly.

Hobo spiders are most commonly found in basements, on windowsills, the ground or lower floors of houses. The hobo is called “the aggressive house spider” because it bites with little or no provocation. Hobo spiders are more abundant in late summer into the fall, when males tend to wander around looking for mates.

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 a reddening area. Within 15 to 35 minutes blisters will form. The blisters then break within 24 hours creating a very obvious oozing wound 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, medical care is advised.

Gardeners can protect themselves by sealing cracks around windows, doors and pipes in their homes where hobo spiders may enter. Be cautious when picking up firewood, and watch for their presence on windowsills and in basements. If you encounter a small number of spiders, they may be controlled manually.

If large numbers of spiders are found in a dwelling, you may need to use chemical controls. Chemical recommendations can be obtained from your county extension office. Chemicals should be used as directed.

Spiders may never rank high on the gardener’s list of favorite wildlife, but remembering that most do not pose any threat and knowing how to identify those that do can allow spiders and gardener’s to coexist peacefully.

Resources

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

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

Brenzel, Kathleen S., Sr. Garden Editor, *Sunset Western Garden Problem Solver*, Sunset Books, Menlo Park, CA 1998, pp 198-199.