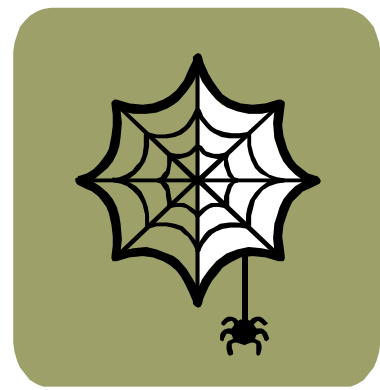


“Oh, What Tangled Webs...”



It's that time again! Spider time, I mean. Clients will be bringing in many spider specimens for us to identify. Most of these are harmless, but people are generally afraid of or at least a bit queasy about spiders in their homes or on their properties. Many of these fears are undoubtedly the result of science fiction movies about attack spiders, or giant spiders, or radioactive spiders, or... well, you get the picture. Actually, as Master Gardeners™, the spider is our friend, a beneficial.

All spiders hunt for their living. They have venom to incapacitate their prey before they devour them. Some venoms kill the prey outright, but some simply immobilize the prey while the spider feeds. Rather ghoulish and draculan I realize, but that is what nature does. The spider cannot feed on the tissue directly and simply drinks in the fluids from the prey.

The spiders that are brought into the office this time of year vary greatly, not only where clients find them, but also in size, color and disposition. One of the most common outdoor spiders to be brought in is a medium sized (1/2 inch) jumping spider. People are frightened of them because they are black with a large red dot on top of their abdomens. Folks sense them to be black widows. Actually, this jumping spider does not build a web like the widow, but simply hunts down its prey and pounces on it. Also, the red spot is on the top of the abdomen, not on the bottom as in the widow. Watching this creature can be fascinating. The eyes are situated to the front of the cephalothorax and they really do have stereo vision. This is useful in estimating the distance to the intended victim. Seldom do they miss.

Another spider commonly brought in is a small black grass spider. You probably have seen them in quantity in your yard. Sometimes, you can't take a step without a dozen or so scurrying away. With the next step another dozen, and so on. People relate to the movie "Arachnophobia", I think, and panic. These are harmless little spiders and have their place in our environmental scheme of things. Later in the year you can see the females carrying egg sacks on their backs. A rather maternal gesture in the primitive animal kingdom.

In the fall, large bodied (abdomens to almost 3/4 inch) garden spiders are often brought in by the public. Since they are large, they seem to frighten people. Actually, they are probably the most useful of the spiders that are on our properties. They set up large orbital shaped webs, and feed on night flying insects that would attack your crops during that time and perhaps even in the future by keeping them from laying eggs. If these large spiders are received while you are on duty, don't kill them. We will ID them and then let them loose in an appropriate area.

The spiders that are the greatest challenge for the Insect Committee are the Tegenarias, or house spiders. One is the Hobo spider which you know has a vicious bite. The other two are relatives, the giant house spider and the domestic house spider, but they are harmless. It is difficult to distinguish which one is which without some detective work. But, that is the subject of another article!

