



SPIDERS the Helpful Hunters

Spiders are beneficial creatures. Because they feed on large quantities of insects, they should be tolerated as much as possible in the home and garden. Spiders are not insects: they are classified as “arachnids” and have eight legs (insects have six legs).

Few Spiders are Dangerous

There are over 3,000 species of spiders in the U.S. and only a small number of these are dangerous to people. In the Bay Area the only spider to cause concern is the black widow (see page 2 for more information). Brown recluse spiders do not live in California, although it is possible for them to be transported here from other parts of the country on furniture or other goods.

Cases of Mistaken Identity

People often think they have been bitten by a spider when the culprit is actually a flea, tick, mite, or even a disease condition or allergic reaction. Very few spiders are equipped with mouth parts that can pierce human skin. If the bites you are discovering are small, mild, and disappear within a day or two, there is nothing to be concerned about. Of course, if a bite affects a large area, is very painful, and/or is followed by dizziness, fever, nausea, or any other severe symptoms, seek medical advice immediately. Try to capture the offending spider, drop it into a small jar of rubbing alcohol, and save it for identification.

What You Can Do

Harmless or not, the presence of spiders or their webs in the house is upsetting to many people. Unfortunately, spider webs are often associated with poor housekeeping, under the mistaken assumption that a “clean” house harbors no insects

or spiders at all. On the contrary, spiders can be an asset to the conscientious housekeeper since they capture and consume many insects before the human residents ever see them.

Inside

- **Vacuum instead of spraying** around the house for spiders. If you cannot endure spiders or their webs in your home, the easiest and safest way to get rid of them is to vacuum up both spiders and webs. The dust inside the vacuum bag will quickly suffocate any spiders you catch. Make a periodic check of the areas where you most often find them.
- **Get rid of just the webs.** If you're willing to try sharing your house with a few spiders, you can periodically vacuum up the webs that might be an eyesore or an embarrassment to you as a housekeeper. Leaving the spiders will allow them to continue to do their work.
- **Take spiders outside.** Catch spiders in a jar or other container, cover the container with a piece of paper, and release outside.
- **Keep spiders out of the house.** Caulk cracks and crevices. Install screens on windows and doors.
- **Reduce their food supply.** What are those spiders eating? Ants? Keep things clean and store food properly (see also the Ant Fact Sheet). Fruitflies? Try storing ripening fruit in paper bags that are folded over twice and sealed with a large clip. Are they feasting on the insects attracted to a porch light? Try a yellow bulb. Are houseflies the problem? Install screens on windows and doors.

Outside

- **Don't spray your garden or around the outside of your house** to kill spiders. Outdoors, spiders are providing a very useful pest control service. Leave them to do their job.
- **Change outside lighting.** Insects are attracted to lights, and spiders congregate where they find large numbers of insects. Try yellow bulbs in porch lights or move lighting away from areas where spiders and their webs may cause a problems. Replace mercury vapor lights with sodium vapor lights that are less attractive to insects.
- **Remove webs** with long-handled cleaning brushes or with a strong stream of water.

Black Widow Spiders

The black widow found in the Bay Area is *Latrodectus mactans*. The shiny black female usually sports a characteristic red hour-glass shaped mark on the underside of her abdomen. The brown recluse spider, another poisonous spider, is not a problem in California.

Black widows are not common in the Bay Area, and deaths from bites are rare. In many people, symptoms are not significant enough to warrant medical treatment. Bites are of most concern for the very young, the very old, and those who are seriously ill.

Black Widows Are Not Aggressive and They Are Rarely Encountered by People.

- Black widows are timid. They make no effort to attack, preferring to lie still or retreat.
- Ordinarily, black widows are reluctant to bite, even when provoked.
- These spiders spend their lives in their webs waiting for prey. They do not go out hunting.

Where Are Black Widows Found?

- Usually (but not always) near the ground
- Dark, dry, protected crevices in and around buildings
- Lower portions of seldom-used cupboards, closets, or other dark, dry storage areas.
- Woodpiles, lumber piles, or rock piles
- Stacked patio furniture, flower pots, or baskets

- Rodent burrows
- Water meter boxes
- Irrigation control boxes
- Around railroad tracks

How to Avoid Bites

- Wear gloves to clean up garages, debris or woodpiles outside, and relatively undisturbed storage areas inside.
- Teach children not to tease spiders in their webs or to poke bare fingers into dark cracks and crevices.
- Always look where you place your hands when doing outdoor work.

How to Inspect for Black Widows

Use a flashlight or headlamp to find them. At night these spiders move to the center of their webs and are more visible.

What To Do about Black Widow Spiders

- If you find certain locations where black widows regularly build webs, try to modify these areas to make them less attractive by increasing the amount of light, caulking crevices, or reducing the insect population the spiders are feeding on.
- Reduce possible black widow habitat by removing debris and woodpiles outdoors. Inside, remove clutter and clean and vacuum storage areas regularly.
- If you have small children, caulk crevices in foundations or other walls that are child height or wide enough for a finger.

For More Information

If you have questions about the information in this fact sheet, contact the Marin County Department of Agriculture at 415-499-6700, or the Bio-Integral Resource Center, PO Box 7414, Berkeley, CA 94707; 510-524-2567.