



Pest Corner

August, 2006

Spiders – The Beneficial Allies

Source: "Web" publication by Rod Crawford, Curator of Arachnids, Burke Museum.
<http://www.washington.edu/burkemuseum/spidermyth/>

Below are some of the spider myths, misconceptions, and superstitions. Every one of the myths listed below is FALSE!

Myth: Spiders are insects.

Truth: Arachnids are as distant from insects, as birds are from fish. Not a trivial distinction!

Myth: "Arachnid" is just a fancy name for spider.

Truth: Not all arachnids are spiders!

Myth: It is a spider because it has eight legs.

Truth: The number of leg pairs (one pair per leg-bearing segment) is more significant than individual legs, which can be lost.

Myth: All spiders make webs.

Truth: Technically, a web is a silk structure made to catch prey. Only about half of the known spider species catch prey by means of webs. Others actively hunt for prey (including members of the wolf-, jumping-, ground-, sac-, lynx-, and other spider families). Some sit and wait for prey to come to them (trap-door spiders, crab spiders, and others). Hunting spiders use their silk for the dragline (the single thread all spiders leave behind them when they walk), the egg sac, and in some species, the retreat (a little silk "house" the spider rests in), but do not make true webs.

Myth: A "daddy-longlegs" is a kind of spider.

Truth: Most gardeners use this term for long-legged harvestmen which are ground-dwelling outdoor creatures. Harvestmen are arachnids, but they are not spiders -- in the same way that butterflies are insects, but they are not beetles. Harvestmen have one body section (spiders have two), two eyes on a little bump (most spiders have eight), a segmented abdomen (unsegmented in spiders), no silk, no venom, a totally different respiratory system, and many other differences; not all have long legs.

Myth: Spiders are most numerous in late summer.

Truth: Not so! Only a few large conspicuous spider species (including the larger orbweavers and the giant house spiders) are mature at that time, but not many other spiders are. In reality, low moisture availability makes summer a much worse time for spiders than fall (October-December) and spring. In mild climates such as western Washington, winter is also better than summer for spiders.

Myth: Spiders "suck the juices" of their prey, and do not literally eat it.

Truth: Spiders are not miniature vampires; all species appear to digest some solid parts of their prey. What makes it especially interesting is that the digestion process begins outside the spider, where anyone who wants to look can see how it works.

Myth: Certain fruits or nuts repel spiders.

Truth: Spiders seldom show any sign of being able to detect airborne odors!

Myth: Spider specimens can be mailed with a letter in a common envelope.

Truth: It is best to preserve spiders in a non-leaky container of rubbing alcohol before they have dried out. Do not use formalin, which is not a preservative for spiders.

Myth: Spiders come into houses in the fall to get out of the cold.

Truth: House spiders are usually not the same species as the yard or garden spiders outside the house. During August and September you see sexually mature males wandering in search of mates. Less than 5% of the spiders you see indoors have ever been outdoors.

Myth: House spiders should be put back outside.

Truth: Although some house spider species can survive outdoors, most cannot; and some will perish when removed from the indoor habitat. House spiders are mostly harmless and beneficial.

Myth: Spiders in bathtubs or sinks came up through the drains from sewers.

Truth: Modern drains contain a liquid-filled sediment trap through which spiders cannot penetrate. House spiders look for water inside tubs and cannot climb back up again!

Myth: Spider "infestations" require control with pesticides.

Truth: Sticky traps remove many more spiders than typical pesticide treatments. Traps do not pollute the environment or make your home toxic. An even better technique is to physically exclude spiders from the space where you don't want them, by sealing gaps, cracks and openings of all kinds. The term infestation does not apply when large numbers of spiders are present at one time!