

Spiders Are Abundant, But Fear Not

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Every autumn, as the first frost approaches, I have an increase in the number of phone calls from homeowners concerning spiders. Some of the calls are simply from fascination as they encounter one of the large colorful orb weavers or garden spiders. Some of the calls are filled with terror or panic as the homeowner encounters a large wolf spider or suddenly sees their front lawn on a dewy morning covered in spider webs.

Spiders are amazing predators. They primarily feed on other insects and arthropods. The bigger the spider, the bigger the prey they can capture and feed on. Some spiders overwinter as adults, but many start out each spring hatching from an egg sac that survived the winter. Early in the season there may be a lot of spiders, but they are small. But as summer progresses and then becomes autumn, the spiders get larger and far more noticeable.

In a year with lots of insects we will have higher survival percentage of spiders. Some species will even go through multiple generations during the summer when food is abundant. Food was abundant this year and the spiders did well, so we can expect to be seeing a lot of spiders this fall.

Many spiders have venom that they use to paralyze prey so they can more easily turn it into food. All spiders have fangs. The venom of several spiders is poisonous to humans, but many of these species have fangs far too short or fragile to penetrate human skin, so they aren't a problem. Other spiders have fangs long enough and strong enough to penetrate human skin, but their venom is not particularly toxic to humans. In Kansas there are two species of spiders that have the right combination of venom and fangs that they are a risk to us. Those are the Black Widow and the Brown Recluse. The Black Widow is very rare in our region. The Brown Recluse is very common. But both of these spiders are very unlikely to be found in the outdoors. We'll discuss dealing with these two species, especially the Brown Recluse, in a future installment.

There are three groups of spiders that tend to capture people's attention this time of year. The first is the garden spiders or orb weavers. These are large spiders, often measuring a couple of inches from leg tip to leg tip. They make large webs and are often found in the center of the web, head down. They are often brightly colored, frequently with yellow and white stripes on their body or legs.

Wolf spiders are large stocky spiders with very stout legs. They don't spin extensive webs and usually capture prey by ambush. As autumn progresses they sometimes will enter homes looking to avoid winter. Like tarantulas, wolf spiders actually make fairly good pets, if you want a spider for a pet!

The final group of spiders we see frequently are the funnel weavers. Funnel weavers make the extensive webbing in lawns that often looks like a webby funnel that leads to the throat at the base where the spider hides. When an insect gets caught in the web, the spider feels the vibrations and runs out to capture it. While the Australian Funnel Weaver is highly poisonous, the funnel weavers that we have here in the states are not a threat.

While an encounter with any of these groups of spiders can be surprising or unsettling, none of these should be considered a threat. As colder weather moves in, they will slowly disappear for another year. In the meantime, enjoy the beauty and variety of these insect predators!