

## **Brown Recluse Spiders are Everywhere**

### **AGRI-VIEWS**

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

As a kid growing up I found black widow spiders to be fascinating and terrifying. I heard all the horror stories of how dangerous their bite was (not quite accurate) but honestly wanted to see one. I'll tell you right now that after all these years I've only seen one and that was one that had been dropped by a wasp on a garage floor and someone had brought in for ID confirmation. Black widow spiders are venomous (NOT poisonous!) but generally not deadly venomous and more importantly they are very uncommon. I've looked in all sorts of nooks and crannies for them without success!

There is another venomous spider that I started to become familiar with in college. The brown recluse spider has a far more complex venom than black widows. Black widows basically have one toxin that is a nerve toxin. Painful, but rarely deadly. The brown recluse has a nerve toxin, a toxin that affects the blood and another toxin that basically inhibits healing. Rarely fatal, but certainly not fun!

As uncommon as black widows are, brown recluses are incredibly common. I know that there are many people out there who don't like any kind of spider so I hope I don't freak anyone out, but I can go into almost any home in northeast Kansas that's more than six months old and find active brown recluses or evidence that brown recluse spiders have been present, mainly shed skins or dead recluses. Now that you've gotten all the shivers out of your body remember one thing; they've been there all this time and you likely haven't been bitten by one!

Brown recluses get their name honestly. They don't want to be bothered. They are hunt and attack spiders, they don't build webs. They hang out in attics, garages, any area that isn't used overly often. They like cardboard boxes and piles of clothes or newspapers. Most bites occur when they are accidentally grabbed while moving boxes, cleaning up, etc. My advice to homeowners is that if you want to reduce your risk of encountering a brown recluse, keep your house very tidy and don't allow anything to stack up.

To my eye, brown recluse spiders are very distinctive. We have a small wolf spider that is commonly found in homes. These spiders have very stout legs, sometimes look hairy, are sort of a brownish/blackish/gray mottled color, and usually have a few thick lines running down their back. Brown recluses, in their normal stance, will just about cover a quarter. Their legs are less stout, they are very clean looking - meaning not hairy - and the brown is a much lighter shade of brown. They also have a mark on their back that looks a bit like a violin or fiddle. I need to add that there are related recluse spiders in other parts of the country that may vary slightly in their appearance, but the recluse that we have in Kansas is as I just described it. I most often encounter recluses in my house in sinks. They stumble in on a hunting expedition and are not able to get back out.

This is the time of year that insects invading houses increases and so do creatures that feed on those insects, like spiders. Treating your foundation with a residual insecticide will help reduce both as will treating baseboard areas inside your home and especially door thresholds and around utility entrances into your home. The good news is that during late fall and winter brown recluses are not active. But until then, know that they are around, but it's no cause for panic or alarm!