Welcome garden spiders

Source: Ric Bessin, extension professor, Department of Entomology

For some of us, the thought of a spider makes us run for a big shoe. Stop before you do that. Most spiders in Kentucky will not harm you, and in fact, spiders play an important role in a healthy ecosystem, controlling insect pests that raid our gardens.

You may notice the large, intricate webs of orb weavers in your garden, particularly in late summer. There are many species of orb weaver spiders in Kentucky. No other common Kentucky spider makes organized, circular, grid-like webs like orb weavers. These spiders are almost always encountered inside their webs.

Orb weavers range in size from the size of a pencil eraser to a little larger, with their legs outstretched, than a U.S. silver dollar. Their coloring ranges from solid tan or brown to colorful, vivid patterns. Seeing one of Kentucky’s largest spiders, a yellow and black Argiope in the center of its web in the morning, when dew droplets turn their work into garden jewelry is a real treat. By the way, their bites are harmless to humans, unless you’re allergic.

When their legs are outstretched, grass spiders are about the size of a U.S. quarter. They are brown with noticeable gray or tan stripes that run the length of their body. They can be distinguished by their prominent hind spinnerets, which are two, finger-like projections on the end of its abdomen that are used to spin the web. Many other spiders have spinnerets, but they are particularly noticeable in grass spiders.

Wolf spiders come in a range of species and sizes, from the size of a pencil eraser to a U.S. silver dollar. Most are dark or light brown, usually with contrasting spots or stripes. They can move fast and are often seen running on the ground. They don’t build webs to catch their prey. Instead they use their sight to pinpoint their prey, mostly at night, and chase them down like their namesakes, wolves.

You may see wolf spiders in your home, but unless you’re allergic, their bite is harmless.

Grass spiders are very common in Kentucky lawns, where they build large, funnel-shaped webs. They also occasionally wander into homes. They can be mistaken for brown recluse spider, because they are brown and similar in size. They are, however, harmless to humans unless an individual is allergic.

Speaking of brown recluses, they are one of two Kentucky spiders that can harm humans, the other being a black widow. Tan to dark brown, a brown recluse’s abdomen and legs are uniformly colored with no stripes, bands, or mottling. The legs are long and thin and lack conspicuous spines. They have a dark violin-shaped mark on their back, with the neck of the violin pointing toward the rear of the spider. This feature is consistent in adult brown recluses, but is less obvious in younger spiders. Also, brown recluses only have six eyes: most Kentucky spiders have eight, but let’s be honest. Are you really going to get close enough to count?

Their bites are serious and require immediate medical attention, but brown recluses are timid and unlikely to bite unless handled. These spiders are common in all areas of Kentucky. They tend to occur in hidden locations indoors and outdoors, such as piles of cardboard or paper, stacks of cut wood and wall-voids of buildings.

Black widow spiders are also common throughout the state. The female black widow is about a half-inch long and is glossy black with a variable number of red markings on the top and/or bottom of her abdomen. Adult males smaller and are similar in color, but with a few added white markings. Juveniles are highly variable. Their bites are very serious and require immediate medical attention, but the spider is timid and unlikely to bite unless handled. They tend to hide out in concealed outdoor locations such as piles of rocks or firewood and dark corners of garages and out-buildings. Females are common; males are very rarely encountered.

To learn about more of Kentucky’s spiders, visit the University of Kentucky Department of Entomology’s Critter Files, <http://www.uky.edu/Ag/CritterFiles/casefile/spiders/spiderfile.htm> or contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the UK Cooperative Extension Service.

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