

Spiders in the Garden

By Annie Mollock, Gallatin Empire Garden Club

Anyone who gardens has come into contact with spiders at one time or another. Greek mythology is responsible for the spider getting its name. The princess Arachne challenged the goddess Athene to a weaving contest. When Arachne lost, she was turned into a spider and destined to weave forever.

These weavers are a gardeners friend! Spiders are beneficial inhabitants of any garden, ecosystem or home because of their important contributions to biological control of pest insects. Spiders are considered to be the most important terrestrial predators, eating tons of pest insects or other small arthropods every year. They feed on a wide variety of insects and are considered beneficial in the garden because of their pest-controlling capabilities. Some of the common insects controlled by spiders include aphids, caterpillars, cucumber beetles, flies, grasshoppers, leafhoppers, plant bugs and thrips. Because of their beneficial nature, garden spiders should be conserved. Avoid the use of broad-spectrum insecticides or insecticides containing pyrethrum or synthetic pyrethroids. Other practices that conserve spiders is to leave a portion of the garden covered in organic material or plant a cover crop to provide an over-wintering site for egg masses.

Spiders belong to the group of arthropods called Arachnids. There are more than 38,000 named species of spiders in the world with 3,000 of them in North America. Spiders differ from insects in that they have 8 legs, not 6; they have 2 body regions instead of 3; and they lack wings and antennae, both of which insects possess. Finally, spiders have unique organs beneath their abdomen called spinnerets. These 6 spinnerets allow the spider to produce silk throughout their entire life.

Take some time to watch a spider spin her web. She will send a single thread out into the breeze until it catches onto something. Then she tightens this tread and attaches the originating end to some structure. She will then reinforce the original line before dropping down to begin the creation of the first cross-thread. Spiders are no doubt some of the best engineers around--capable of determining the exact distance, angle, and tension necessary to construct the perfect trap for their prey.

Most spiders are venomous but very few are harmful to humans, the black widow and brown recluse being two exceptions. The venom produced by spiders is used to paralyze and kill their prey. Spiders rarely attack unless provoked and they are more likely to flee than fight.

This year while spending time in your garden, look around and see how many different kinds of spiders you can find. Keep in mind some of the gardening practices you can do to benefit these creatures who in turn will repay you by helping keep pest insects under control.

