

Spiders



Spiders are among most effective predators of plant pests

Although many people have a built-in aversion to them, spiders rank as one of the gardener's best tools for biological pest control.

They also are one of the few pest predators that don't eat plants.

"Spiders eat the (equivalent insect) weight of all the humans on earth annually "A significant percentage of those insects are herbivores or carnivores (seed eaters) or other insects that adversely affect humans. Spiders perform a vital function."

There are more than 45,500 known spider species around the world, divided into 110 spider families.

"Few of those have venom that affects us," she said. "The yellow sac spider, the black widow and the recluse. That's about it. And none are aggressive."

Spiders, including black widows, respond to movements in their webs, and that leads to people getting bitten.

"Black widows are super common in the desert around the U.S. but you'll also find them in many cities because they have water," she said. "Houses and edges of houses are perfect for black widows. They can build underneath and protect their webs."

Spiders use venom to kill or paralyze their prey. They actively hunt or spin webs to trap insects, invertebrates, and even small vertebrates like lizards and frogs. What also makes them garden-friendly is that they don't eat plants.

"They'll eat a little pollen, maybe, but that's about it," she said. "They're totally beneficial to have in the garden."

On the unfavourable side, spiders are generalists in what they hunt and cannibalistic. They feed on other spiders and many beneficial insects, including honeybees and butterflies.

Spiders also are not a good choice for taking out specific plant pests in fields or gardens if there's a particular outbreak you're trying to eradicate. "But for reducing all prey abundance in certain areas, they're great."



Rather than try to eliminate spiders in or near homes, the knowledgeable, organic-leaning gardener prefers to recruit them.

You can increase spider numbers in the garden by:

— Adding more trees, shrubs and perennials to provide anchor points for web-building spiders to spin their webs.— Allowing areas to go untilled, or leaving plant stalks standing for overwintering habitat. Many adult spiders emerge in early spring, before most other bio-control resources are available.

— Mulching with grass or wood chips to provide cover and humidity.

— Growing flowers that attract insect prey.

