

Learn to love spiders. (from Ciscoe's Seattle Times archives)

Do you believe there are brown recluse spiders in Washington State? When you wake up with a bug bite do you assume it was from a spider? Is it true that daddy long legs have a deadly bite, but their fangs are too short to pierce human skin? Has an enormous number of baby tarantulas hatched within a potted cactus making it explode, thereby shooting baby tarantulas all over the house? Misconceptions like these are probably the reason that Arachnophobia (fear of spiders) is the second most common phobia. These are also just a few of the myths that Rod Crawford, Curator of Arachnids at the University of Washington's Burke Museum, debunks in his informative and entertaining 'Spider Myths' website: www.burkemuseum.org/blog/curated/spider-myths.

One reason people fear spiders is because they know so little about them. The truth is that few spiders are capable of hurting us, and most are incredibly beneficial. Spiders play a key role in helping to control harmful insects in our gardens and our homes. As a group, they eat more bugs than any other creature; hence the more spiders you can attract to your garden, the less pest control you need worry about. They also protect human health by eliminating disease-carrying insects such as mosquitoes and fleas.

According to Rod, contrary to popular belief, none of the common spiders found in Puget Sound gardens present a serious threat to pets or humans. Although it's true that all spiders have venom, the vast majority of them are either too small or the venom they possess is too weak to harm humans. Spider bites are extremely rare and you are much more likely to be stung by a bee or a wasp. If one did somehow manage to bite you, it would be no worse than a bee sting, and unlike the allergic reaction some people have to wasps and bee stings, spider venom allergies are practically unheard of.

One common misconception is that there are more spiders in late summer and fall than in spring. Spiders hatch in the spring, and reproduce and die in the fall. There are just as many in spring, but they hide to keep from being eaten. We notice them more in fall because they risk coming out to find mates and make webs in order to have a place to lay their eggs.

What really freaks people out are those big, scary looking spiders that show up in our houses in late summer and fall. These terrifying looking spiders are either hobo spiders (also known as aggressive house spiders) or the very similar sized giant house spiders. These honkers can get up to three-quarters of an inch long with a leg span of 4 inches. Despite their scary size, these spiders aren't aggressive, and instead are shy, reluctant to bite and try to escape when disturbed. Giant house spiders have a scary reputation for bites that fester and won't heal, but according to the Washington Department of Health website (www.doh.wa.gov > Community and Environment > Pests > Spiders) research has shown that hobo spider venom is not capable of causing necrotic wounds. In addition, hobo spiders are endemic to Europe and have never been reported to be harmful there. According to Rod Crawford, if you move these spiders outside, it most likely will kill them. They live in your house year round and aren't adapted to the harsh realities of outdoor life. Give those gentle creatures a break. Their only crime is coming out in the open to look for a sweetheart and we all know how hard it is to play the dating game.

If I've convinced you that spiders are beneficial, there are several things you can do to attract more spiders to help with pest control in your garden. Apply light, fluffy mulch such as grass clippings, leaves or wood-chips. Plant closely so that the leaves of plants touch, and allow grass to reach 3 inches tall before mowing it to 2 inches. Avoid using non-selective broad-spectrum pest controls because they are deadly to spiders. Finally shake off your arachnophobia by checking out Rod Crawford's 'Spider Myths' website. No matter what Rod says, however, if you notice your potted cactus starting to shake, run!!!