

Widow Spiders in California

By Sara Ostrander

As gardeners, we need to be aware of different hazards outdoors. One of those hazards that make most people cringe are spiders, and black widow spiders in particular. Although there are black widow spiders in Michigan, until I moved to California, I never did much research on them. (Actually, the spiders are a different species in Michigan.) The information I found was helpful – With a little common sense, we don't need to fear them.

I discovered that there are 3 different widow spiders in California. The western black widow (*Latrodectus hesperus*) is native and common throughout California. Adult females are shiny black with a red hourglass on the belly. (I am never going to turn a spider over to check their belly.) Their venom is a neurotoxin, but bites are rare and rarely fatal. Invasive brown widows are also replacing them in some urban Southern California areas.

Prevention tips

Because black widow spiders hide, you might not see them even if they're close by. Protect yourself in areas where they might live:

- Shake out your gardening gloves before putting them on. Shake out boots or shoes that you've stored in garages, basements, or sheds before putting them on.
- Always wear gloves when moving wood, reaching into wood piles, handling mulch, grabbing empty flower pots, etc.
- If you'll be working in a garage or shed, or under a porch or deck, wear a hat to protect your head.

According to University of California guidance from the [UC Integrated Pest Management Program](#), anyone bitten by a black widow spider should remain calm and seek immediate medical attention. Symptoms can escalate from local pain to severe muscle cramps, rigid stomach muscles, and sweating, requiring professional medical care or antivenom evaluation.

Immediate First Aid

- **Wash the area** with clean soap and water.
- **Apply a cool compress** or ice pack wrapped in a cloth for 10 to 20 minutes to reduce swelling.
- **Elevate** the affected limb if possible.
- **Stay calm** to slow the spread of venom through your system.

What NOT to Do

- **Do not cut** the wound or try to suck out the venom.
- **Do not apply** a tight tourniquet.
- **Avoid** heavy activity or alcohol while monitoring symptoms.

When to Seek Emergency Care

Go to an emergency room immediately or contact California Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222 if you experience severe systemic reactions:

- Severe belly, chest, or back pain and muscle rigidity
- Trouble breathing or chest tightness
- Nausea, vomiting, heavy sweating, or tremors
- High fever or spreading redness/streaking

Identification and Appearance

- **Western Black Widow:** Jet-black, glossy, bulbous abdomen with a bright red or orange-red underside hourglass.
- **Brown Widow (Common Lookalike/Invasive):** Tan to mottled brown with striped legs and an orange/yellow hourglass; leaves spiky, spiny egg sacs.
- **False Black Widow:** Dark brown or purplish with a round body, but completely lacks the red or orange hourglass marking. 1:01

Habitat and Behavior of Black Widows

- Prefer warm, dry, dark, and undisturbed locations.
- Commonly found in garages, woodpiles, sheds, meter boxes, under patio furniture, and around dense ground cover.
- Build irregular, messy webs close to the ground.
- Not aggressive; they bite only in self-defense, typically when accidentally pressed against human skin.

Symptoms of a Bite

- Immediate or delayed sharp pain at the bite site.
- Intense muscle cramps or rigid stomach muscles.
- Sweating, nausea, and general agitation.
- Seek immediate medical care if bitten, especially for young children or older adults.

Additional Resources:

UC ANR IPM Website: [Widow Spiders and Their Relatives](#)

I Naturalist Identification: [Western Black Widow \(*Latrodectus hesperus*\)](#)
[Brown Widow \(*Latrodectus geometricus*\)](#)
[False Black Widow \(*Steatoda grossa*\)](#)

Poison Control Center: [Black Widow Spider Bites](#)