

The Press Democrat
July 13, 2024

Don't be afraid of spiders in Sonoma County gardens SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS



Beth Schlander / The Press Democrat

Sonoma County gardens are places where something novel is always happening.

Wide temperature swings keep us on our toes. We relish the sight of beneficial insects showing up to feed upon insect pests that inhabit the soil and plants.

Frequent time spent in the garden helps us keep tabs on how our plants are doing, harvest what's ripe and be aware of problems so that we can formulate solutions.

Early mornings and cool evenings are delightful times of day for garden tasks as well as for enjoying the vibrant greenery, the colorful blossoms and the ripening of fruits and vegetables.

Question: I'm seeing a lot of spiders and spider webs in my garden. I'm always amazed when the perfect angle of sunlight reveals the visual beauty and the engineering feat of a shimmering spider web. But, when I come upon a live spider in the garden or see one crawling out from garden greens or flowers I've just brought into the house, I am frightened. Part of me wants to kill the spider, but then I wonder if that would be the right thing to do.

Answer: Almost all the spiders in your garden are beneficial predators of insects and other pests. Most spiders are harmless to people. The webs you are seeing are the work of an orb spider. These webs are not only traps that intercept and immobilize flying insects. They also are a surveillance system that allows the spider to sense the vibrations coming through the strands of the web.

Definitely, avoid killing spiders in your garden. Spiders protect your garden by keeping down other insect populations. The spiders commonly seen out in the open during the day are unlikely to bite people. Spiders that hide, such as black widows, are more likely to injure people, and they generally spend most of their time outside homes lurking in woodpiles or clutter in the garage.

If you want to identify a spider you're seeing, take a photo with your phone and research the image later. Although it's common to worry that we might be seeing a brown recluse spider, rest assured they do not occur naturally in California. There are no breeding populations in the state although sometimes they hitch a ride inside household furnishing, firewood and motor vehicles.

There are related species of brown recluse spiders that occur in southern desert areas of California and can cause similar medical concerns. See our Integrated Pest Management (IPM) website for more information and photos of common garden spiders in Sonoma County. bit.ly/3L2sm9G.

Question: Several of my roses have black spot on their leaves, and some of the petals are slightly damaged. I've noticed earwigs crawling out of my freshly picked flower bouquets. And, although I have cucumbers on the vine, some of the leaves are showing signs of powdery mildew. Do you have any suggestions?

Answer: It's not surprising that your garden has some black spot, earwigs and mildew. Gardens are living environments with lots going on all the time. For the most part, these problems do not affect the quantity of flowers or the quality of the cucumbers.

Master Gardeners prioritize Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices such as cleaning up any dropped leaves or petals around rose bushes, keeping foliage dry when watering the plant and applying compost for plant nutrition. Sometimes the careful use of a horticultural oil, such as neem oil, is helpful. Horticultural oil sprays are one of the weapons that IPM practitioners use in the control of harmful insects and diseases.

If you apply a diluted solution of neem oil in the late evening or early morning when bees are inactive, it's practically nontoxic to birds, mammals, humans and bees. The solution is slightly toxic to fish and other aquatic animals. While horticultural oils are nonselective, they smother most insects they contact including beneficial insects. The oils evaporate quickly, degrade rapidly and leave no toxic residue, making them less disruptive to beneficial insect populations than chemical insecticides. Repeat applications may be needed at seven to 10-day intervals for fungi and more often for

insects. Most garden supply stores will have spray bottles of neem oil already diluted to garden strength, or small bottles of straight neem oil to be diluted and used with a hose and garden sprayer.

Follow the manufacturer's instructions on the container, and be sure to rinse out your sprayer after use because the neem oil can dry and clog the spray nozzle.

The goal is not a picture-perfect garden. The goal is everything working together so that you'll have lots of butterflies and other pollinators in addition to beneficial insects doing their part to keep your garden in balance.

Sally Singingtree and Diane Judd contributed to this column. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County (sonomamgucanr.edu) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either through The Press Democrat or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.