

Friday's Feature

By

Theresa Friday

August 30, 2009

### **Spiders are partners in pest control**

Dog Days or "the dog days of summer", refers to the hottest, most sultry days of summer. I've often wondered if, in Northwest Florida, we should call this time of year the "spider days of summer" due to the abundance of these creatures.

Florida has plenty of spiders, and you've probably seen them around your landscape. You may have even accidentally run into them. Most aren't harmful to people, and, in fact, are considered beneficial.

Spiders are beneficial inhabitants of any garden or ecosystem because of their important contributions to biological control of pest insects. Spiders are considered to be one of the most important terrestrial predators, eating tons of pest insects or other small arthropods every year. Spiders are generalist predators that are willing to eat almost any insect they can catch.

There are two general groups of spiders—the web spinners and the hunters. Web spinning spiders create elaborate silk orbs to capture their prey. These spiders are typically found in, or near, their webs laying in wait for their next meal. Hunting spiders are typically robust and actively track down their prey.

Some of our most noticeable summer spiders are the web spinning orb-weavers. They build the large spiral wheel-shaped webs often found in gardens, fields and forests.

One of our most conspicuous orb-weavers is the large golden silk spider, also known as the banana spider. The banana spider preys on a wide variety of small to medium sized flying insects, which include mosquitoes, grasshoppers, stinkbugs, leaf-footed bugs, bees, butterflies, flies, small moths and wasps. Banana spiders have even been seen feeding on beetles and dragonflies. Because of its size, people sometimes assume that the banana spider is dangerous to people. In reality, it is a shy spider (as nearly all spiders are).



There is little danger to a healthy adult from an encounter with the banana spider. It will only bite if held or pinched and the bite itself will produce a localized pain with a slight redness, which quickly goes away. On the whole, the bite is much less severe than a bee sting. It is best avoided, but it won't kill you.



Another common web-weaving spider is the spiny-orb weaver. One of the more colorful spiders in Florida, it is not as large as some of the other common orb weavers. It is, however, easily recognizable because of its "crab" shape and six pointed abdominal projections frequently referred to as "spines."

Another common garden spider that may give you a bit of a fright due to its black and red coloration is the orchard spider. This small spider with red markings may make you think it's a black widow. However, this orb weaver is associated with a large web, typically visible along the edge of gardens, shrub beds and forests. The venomous black widow, however, is usually found outdoors in protected places, such as under rocks and boards.

Garden spiders aren't aggressive. If you disturb one, a garden spider will vibrate the web and try to look larger to discourage predators. If this doesn't work, it will drop to the ground and hide.

So, if you happen to see one of these creatures, leave it alone. The benefits of having a garden spider in your yard or garden greatly outweigh the negatives. As opportunistic feeders, they eat many insect pests. These magnificent spiders are welcome alternatives to pesticides.



Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu>.

###