Friday’s Feature

By
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Scary spiders are beneficial visitors to the garden

Florida has plenty of spiders, and you’ve probably seen them around your landscape; you may have even run into one of their webs. Before you destroy that spine-chilling web, just remember that most aren’t harmful to people and many are considered beneficial.

Spiders are beneficial inhabitants of any garden because of their biological control of pest insects. Spiders are considered to be the most important terrestrial predators, eating tons of pest insects or other small arthropods every year. Spiders are general predators that are willing to eat almost any insect they can catch. They are abundant and found in most habitats.

One rather scary looking spider commonly found in our area is the banana spider. *Nephila clavipes* is a large size and brightly colored species of the orb-web spider family. *Nephila* comes from Ancient Greek, meaning “fond of spinning.” Most people call them banana or golden silk spiders, but other common names are calico spider, giant wood spider, golden silk orb weaver and writing spiders. The ‘golden’ refers to the color of the silk, not the color of the spider, for the web of a mature female has yellow threads which look like rich gold in the sunshine.

Golden silk spiders are beneficial creatures
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. Oddly, some banana spiders are reported to display an almost manic fear of cockroaches. It is thought the cockroach’s fast movements and large, dark shape cause some of the species to run from or ignore a perfectly good meal.

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). Just know this species is considered medically harmless to humans. 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."

The spines on the abdomen may have an anti-predator function but spiny orb weavers are small so it may be hard for a predator to see, much less attack, them. Other common names are crab-like orbweaver, spinybacked orbweaver and spiny orbweaver spider.

While many think they already have an abundance of spiders, there are ways to attract spiders to your landscape. You can provide spider habitat by covering bare dirt with mulch, creating a "wild" area in your yard, planting dense shrubs and coniferous trees, and providing a water source such as a pond.

Yes, it may require some time for most humans to take a liking to spider, or at least to reduce their level of
disgust or fear. However, you’re likely to develop a new found admiration and appreciation for spiders if you ever witness their beneficial works—especially when you come across one of their large webs filled with the carcasses of blood-sucking mosquitoes and other small biting flyers.

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.

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