

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

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Common Kentucky Spiders

Spiders catch our attention in the garden, home, garage, or outbuildings. There are many common and fascinating spiders found in Kentucky. Two spiders are important to learn how to identify because their venom is medically significant in harming humans. Remember that all spiders can be dangerous if a person is allergic or sensitive to spiders and insects. Dr. Lee Townsend and Dr. Mike Potter, University of Kentucky Extension Entomologists, describe several common spiders.

Spiders feed mostly on small insects and other arthropods. Some trap their prey in webs or snares. Others are active hunters and use excellent vision to ambush their food. Most spiders found in homes and buildings are accidental invaders that have entered around doors, windows, or other openings.

Virtually all spiders have poison glands that connect with the fangs. Venom produced by the glands apparently is used in defense and to kill or paralyze prey. Most species do not attempt to bite. Many have fangs that are not capable of piercing the skin. Only a few species, such as

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the black widow and brown recluse, have venom that is very toxic to humans. However, some bites will result in a reaction similar to a wasp or bee sting.

The brown recluse, *Loxosceles reclusa*, is the only member of the brown spider family (Loxoscelidae) that lives in Kentucky. Coloration ranges from tan to dark brown, and the abdomen and legs are uniformly colored. The legs are long and thin and lack conspicuous spines. A distinguishing feature is the dark violin-shaped mark on its back, with the neck of the violin pointing toward the rear or abdomen of the spider. This feature is consistent in adult brown recluses, but sometimes less obvious in younger spiders.

Although bites are rare from the brown recluse, the venom can cause serious wounds. It is associated with tissue destruction and may require surgical treatment.

The brown recluse makes a web that appears messy and dense, usually close to the ground or floor preferably in dark secluded areas. Brown recluses are common indoors and can live all year long in homes, barns, sheds, warehouses, and greenhouses. They are found in protected outdoor areas as well. Brown recluses tend to hide during the day and hunt for insects at night.

Black widow spiders belong to the cobweb spider family (Theridiidae) and spin loosely organized trap webs. The female is about one-half inch long, is shiny black, and usually has a red hourglass mark on the underside of the abdomen. The webs are found mostly under objects such as rocks and ground trash or under an overhanging embankment. They are not as common in homes as the brown recluse. When found in homes, they are usually under appliances or heavy furniture and not out in the open like other cobweb spiders.

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Black widow spiders are timid, however, and will only bite in response to being injured. Black widow venom is a nerve toxin and its effects are rapid. Victims should seek medical attention promptly.

Wolf spiders look fierce and their rapid movements make them seem aggressive. Most are dark brown. Wolf spiders actively hunt prey and do not use snares or webs. They have strong fangs and could bite if disturbed or pinched. They inhabit grassy or leaf-covered areas and may be active during the day or night. The female carries an egg sac on her rear end. Wolf spiders do not persist indoors but are common accidental invaders.

Funnel web spiders (Agelenidae family) or grass spiders resemble wolf spiders but have a pair of long, distinctive silk spinning tubes at the rear of the abdomen. The spiders live in shrubbery, grass, under rocks, or in debris and seldom come indoors. They build a horizontal, sheet-like web that has a funnel-shaped retreat. Webs are most obvious when covered with morning dew.

Jumping spiders (Salticidae family) have a distinctive body shape and short, strong front legs; many are brightly colored or iridescent. Two very large eyes on the front of the head give them the best vision of all spiders. They slowly stalk their prey and make a sudden pounce from a short distance. Salticids occasionally wander indoors and may overwinter there.

Crab spiders (Thomisidae family) have two long front pairs of legs. They wait in ambush for insect prey on plants, flowers, tree trunks, or soil litter. They rarely enter buildings and do not persist indoors.

Cellar spiders (Pholcidae family) have very long skinny legs and a small body. They make stringy webs in shady corners of basements, pantries, closets, attics, barns, and sheds.

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One of Kentucky's largest spiders is an orb weaver (Araneidae family) called the black and yellow *Argiope*, *Argiope auranti*. They are also called writing spiders because of the bold zigzag pattern built into their web. It is almost 3 inches long from leg tip to leg tip. *Argiope* spiders are very common in backyard gardens. Although intimidating, their bite is only dangerous to people who experience severe allergic reactions to insect and spider bites.

More information about managing spiders is available at the University of Kentucky website <http://www.uky.edu/Ag/CritterFiles/casefile/spiders/spiderfile.htm>, or through the Daviess County Extension Service Office at 270-685-8480 or Annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's Tips:

To preserve food safely, through canning and freezing for example, always use information from your local Extension Office, the National Center for Home Food Preservation <https://nchfp.uga.edu>, or a state Extension website. You can also use the Ball Blue Book for how-to information and for recipes. In Daviess County, Katie Alexander, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent, is available to provide information at 270-685-8480.

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