

## **Spiders Are Garden Guardians** **by Vera Strader**

Remember the children's verse about the eency weency spider that went up the waterspout? I've always envisioned that little guy to be a crab spider so named because it looks somewhat like a crab. It even runs sideways after its prey.

Nearly all spiders are highly successful predators of insects and sometimes other spiders as well. In turn, they are an invaluable food source for countless garden creatures including birds, lizards, toads, and frogs. Spiders are major contributors to a well-functioning organic garden.

Spiders are arachnids rather than insects, with eight legs and two body parts divided by a narrow waist. Insects have but six legs plus three body parts.

Another spider hallmark is the ability to make silk; some, like the crab spider, make a drag line or "safety rope" used to control its descent down that water spout. Ballooning spiderlings, or baby spiders of several species, make silk strands that are caught in the breeze and allow them to travel to new, perhaps distant homes. Some spiders spin silk for binding prey or making egg cases. Others spin webs to snare prey.

Webs can be simple sheets of silk, a relatively disorganized and shapeless mass, or the amazing wheel-like creation with rim and spokes spun by the famous orb weavers.

**SPIDERS ABOUND:** Spiders of many types live all around us—up to 100 in just a 3 ft. garden space. Generally spiders have eight eyes, though possibly fewer, even none. Some, like the orb weavers, don't see well but are highly attuned to detecting vibrations in their web, indicating a probable lunch.

In addition to the orb weaver and crab spider, you might see jumping spiders, the athletes of the spider world. Some jump many times their body length. Wolf spiders prey on insects that are walking around or resting. Some wolf spiders run on water as well as they do on land.

A funnel weaver spins its funnel-shaped web, perhaps several inches wide, near the ground in grasses and other vegetation. It then waits in the hole of its web for an insect to come along, grabs and bites its prey, and hauls it back to its hole in the web to be eaten.

Dune spiders cartwheel down sand dunes to avoid enemies. A good number of spiders can forfeit a leg if grabbed by a predator, and then replace that leg at the next molt.

Spiders come in many sizes. Look closely and you will likely find countless eency weency spiders hiding in and under the plants in your yard. The largest spider you are likely to see in the Mother Lode is the hairy, ferocious-looking though generally harmless tarantula.

With few exceptions, spiders have poison glands, but most won't bite humans even when handled since they cannot pierce human skin. Their venom instead is used to kill much smaller prey and used as a defense against their garden predators.

The only poisonous spider in the Mother Lode is the black widow. For info about the black widow and other troublesome spiders, visit <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PDF/PESTNOTES/pnspiders.pdf> The brown recluse, another poisonous spider, is not known to be found in this area.

The fear of spiders, arachnophobia, has been fostered by Hollywood and late night TV. The real study of spiders is called arachnology. As you learn more about spiders, you too will subscribe to the old rhyme, "If you want to live and thrive, let the spider run alive."

For a tour of the spider world with stunning photographs, go to <http://www.awesomespiders.com/>

*Vera Strader fondly remembers the tarantulas that in times past wandered through her Sonora yard.*