

## Meet Your Smallest Garden Helper

You don't hear a lot of conversations about spiders, do you? I was reminded yesterday when a friend quoted Sir Walter Scott's, "What a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive." Unlike the webs we humans weave, spiders follow a pattern beginning with a horizontal strut. A second thread hangs below with a third dropping from a midpoint so they have a taut "Y" shape as a basis. The rest of the web is composed of both dry and sticky threads...amazing.

These spinners are not insects but invertebrate arachnid, arthropods. Master Gardener Ann Hohenberger wove a story in the October issue of the Gloucester Gardener's Journal, "An Abundance of Silk." She has allowed me to share it with you.

"Spiders always have given me hair-raising heebie jeebies when they get too near but I'm still fascinated by them and drawn to watch. Being a family of gardeners, we have a great respect for these creatures that do us a favor by consuming a wide variety of insects in the garden."

Due to an abundance of food this season, right now is a great time to observe spiders and webs. If you venture outside very early in the morning you will discover a dew covered silken wonderland. Shimmering webs festoon grass, bushes, and trees. There are a multitude of different webs from tunnels to chaotic masses, from long threads connecting shrubs and trees to the ones that amaze the most, the giant orb webs. Black and yellow argiopes are the spiders that spin these magnificent orbs. These spiders are of the most colorful spiders and the bodies of the females can reach almost two inches long. We measured! The web of this female spider spirals out from the center and can be two feet across with a telltale zigzag line in the center called a stabilimenta the purpose of which is not completely understood. These are among the strongest webs known. Walk through one, getting a mouthful as I did this summer, and you will discover how tough their silk is. I have read that if we could produce a man-made product from the orb silk, it could be useful for parachutes or bulletproof vests.

Last month we had a proliferation of orb weavers and dozens of these 'writing spiders' left the overpopulated gardens and spun webs on decks, outdoor furniture, across windows, a doorway eaves and steps. This gave us an opportunity to learn more about them.

"The large female spider hangs head down in the center of her web and the smaller male can often be found on the edge. Although fierce looking the argiopes are the most benign and reclusive spiders. If disturbed the female will vibrate her nest vigorously to intimidate but poses no threat.

"A bite is rare, but should it happen, the reaction will be very mild. These are not aggressive spiders and the best control is to leave them alone since the end of their life

cycle is near. A much better thing would be to pick up a book and learn more about these special animals and teach those around you.

She is there at this time of year to produce her egg sacs. We are watching our orb weavers bellies swell and distend before producing large egg sacs that can contain a thousand young. My son adopted a favorite orb last month and fed her a steady diet of moths. She grew plump and so tame that she would anticipate her meal when my son would swing in his arm. Like a dog anticipating a thrown ball, she would sprint in eagerness for her meal before it hit her web. She was able to produce three large egg sacs before her death.

In the spring these young spiders will leave their sacs and go off on their own. They will, of course, like Wilbur watching over Charlotte's youngsters, have us to watch over them. Salutations!

I hope you enjoyed Ann's story and it helped you recover from your Miss Muffet syndrome. Do you suppose anyone sits on a tuffet any longer, much less dines on curds and whey.