

PEST CONTROL BULLETIN NO. 3

BLACK WIDOW SPIDERS

Lactrodectus hesperus



Female Black Widow

GENERAL INFORMATION

The most commonly encountered venomous spider in California is the black widow spider that also goes by its scientific name, *Lactrodectus hesperus*. The adult female black widow is readily identified by its eight legs, two body regions, glossy black exterior, large globular abdomen (1/4 to 3/8 inch in diameter), and conspicuous red "hour glass" marking on the underside of the abdomen. Immature females are not colored black, but are brightly marked with irregular stripes of white, yellow, orange, and brown on the abdomen; however, the red "hour glass" marking is still clearly visible. Male black widows are significantly smaller than females and marked similarly to an immature female.

The web constructed by the black widow spider consists of very strong, sticky strands of silk that are spun in an irregular pattern. Several major support strands of silk often are spun from an overhead anchor point to support an "umbrella" shaped canopy of silk constructed just above the ground. Black widow webs commonly are encountered in protected corners of homes, garages, basements, and outdoors in wood and junk piles.

The female black widow produces a large white silken egg case that is suspended by accessory strands of silk in the "umbrella" portion of the web. With an egg case present in the web, females will protect the eggs from parasites and predators.

PRECAUTIONS

Female black widow spiders under normal circumstances are not aggressive but will bite instinctively when handled or threatened. The venomous bite of a black widow can lead to a number of neurological disorders in adults and

occasionally can be fatal to young children. If accidentally bitten, one should seek immediate medical attention. Also, the spider (not necessarily a black widow) inflicting the bite should be captured, preserved in rubbing alcohol (4-6 oz. jar or pill vial), and taken to the family physician for identification and clinical reference.

PREVENTION AND CONTROL

Black widow spiders can be excluded from gaining access into the interior of homes by securing a tight seal around doors and window screens. Each spring the weather seal around front and back doors should be checked for visible cracks and wear. Around the yard some exclusion is afforded by keeping landscaping pruned, grass mowed, and destroying weeds in open areas. When either clearing out storage sheds, garages, or working in the backyard, caution should be taken to avoid being bitten by wearing long pants, long sleeve shirts, and heavy duty leather gloves that cover the shirt sleeves.

If a homeowner chooses to use a chemical pesticide to control black widow spiders on their property, please be advised to exercise care and make absolutely certain that the product used is appropriately labeled for controlling spiders, including black widows. If a homeowner chooses not to make a chemical application, professional control and chemical application services can be obtained from a licensed private pest control operator.



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