

NEWS RELEASE
February 20, 2002

SPIDERS

BACKYARD HORTICULTURE
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Several calls to our office recently have related to spiders in Mariposa. It is important to have an understanding of these eight-legged creatures. For the most part, spiders are beneficial because of their role as predators of insects and most cannot harm people.

The U.C. leaflet, "Brown Recluse and other Recluse Spiders" by Dr. R. Vetter of U.C. Riverside, has some very interesting facts on spiders. If asked to name all the spiders they are familiar with, most Californians would have a short list: tarantula, black widow, and brown recluse. Tarantulas are well known because of their large, intimidating size and their use in many movies as eight-legged villains. Black widows are very common throughout the state, are potentially dangerous, and are easily identifiable by their shiny black body color and red hourglass on the belly. The brown recluse, however, is an enigma: there are no populations of the brown recluse *Loxosceles reclusa* in the state and fewer than ten verified specimens have been collected over several decades in California. Yet people frequently relate stories in which they, or someone they know, was supposedly bitten by a brown recluse in California.

COMMON AND SCIENTIFIC NAMES

Over the years, the group of spiders to which the brown recluse belongs has been known by various colloquial names: "violin" spiders, "fiddleback" spiders, "recluse" spiders, and "brown" spiders.

IDENTIFICATION

The most definitive physical feature of recluse spiders is their eyes: most spiders have eight eyes that typically are arranged in two rows of four, but recluse spiders have six equal-sized eyes arranged in three pairs. The violin shaped mark can vary widely and is not a good method of identification. If you do find a recluse spider in California, it will most likely be the native desert recluse, *L. deserta*. However, this species is not known to occur in Mariposa County.

MISIDENTIFICATION

Because of the misinformation surrounding the brown recluse's presence in California, many spiders that are virtually harmless are turned in by the public for identification, but most of them are not even from the recluse family. The few *Loxosceles* spiders that have been brought in were the desert recluse (not the brown recluse) and, not surprisingly, were found in the eastern deserts where they are native.

UBIQUITOUS BROWN SPIDERS

Virtually every spider that is tan or brown has been turned in as a potential brown recluse. There are hundreds of species of these spiders in California. They include ground spiders, sac spiders, wolf spiders, grass spiders, orb weavers and others. All of these brown spiders have eight eyes and can quickly be eliminated from consideration.

The brown recluse spider is the proper common name for only one species, *Loxosceles reclusa*. It lives in the south central Midwest from Nebraska to Ohio and south through Texas to Georgia. The brown recluse does not live in California.

MEDICAL MISDIAGNOSES

One reason for the great "awareness" of the recluse spiders throughout the United States is that necrotic wounds are misdiagnosed as "brown recluse bites." Although recluses can cause these wounds, the biological data involving the distribution of the spider indicate that most of these diagnoses are incorrect. Nationwide, some "brown recluse bites" were subsequently correctly diagnosed as Staphylococcus infection, Streptococcus infection, Lyme disease, herpes simplex, diabetic ulcer, or bites from bedbugs, mites, ticks, small wasps, biting flies, or other spiders.

In any event, 90% of all brown recluse bites in the Midwest heal without severe problems and millions of people have lived there for years without experiencing bites.

For more information, contact the UC Cooperative Extension office in Mariposa, 966-2417, and ask for Leaflet #7468.

Weather Data:

U. C. Weather Station – Mariposa County Fairgrounds, 1,976' elevation, February 13 – 19, high temperature 68 degrees, low temperature 33 degrees, rainfall 1.24 inches.

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