

Widow Spiders

Widow spiders are in the genus *Latrodectus*, meaning “biting in secret”. Four species of widow spiders can be found in various parts of Texas. To properly identify three of them to species, one would need to dissect the spider and look at the genitalia. We can somewhat narrow down what type of widow spider based upon location and shape of markings on the spider.

Southern widows- *Latrodectus mactans*, western widows- *Latrodectus hesperus*, and northern widows- *Latrodectus variolus*- look remarkably similar to each other while the brown widow- *Latrodectus geometricus*- is easy to discern from the other widows in the state. Brown widow spiders are not native to Texas and originate in Africa. They have naturalized and can be found in various parts of the state.

Female brown widows can vary in color from light brown to gray with a reddish-orange hourglass on the underside of the abdomen. Lighter colored females may also have white markings on the upper side of the abdomen. Legs are alternating bands of black/dark brown and light brown.



Southern widows, western widows, and northern widows tend to be dark grey to black in color. Northern widows may completely lack an hourglass or may have two red lines in place of an hourglass. Southern and western widows have an hourglass or two triangles on the underside of the abdomen. Western widows may have the back

triangle somewhat larger than the front. All three of these widows may have a reddish-orange spot on top of the abdomen just above the spinnerets. Nevertheless, widow spider coloration can vary wildly.



Southern widows tend to be the most found widow spider in most parts of Texas. Western widows displace them in the western part of Texas and down into the Valley. Northern widows tend to reside in the eastern parts of Texas while brown widows are variable and we are still tracking where they are found. You can report sightings of brown widow spiders here:

<https://cisr.ucr.edu/texas-brown-widow-study>

Juvenile widow spiders have a gray to black abdomen with white stripes and yellow and orange spots. Adult males may be completely black or have coloration similar to juveniles. They do not have an hourglass marking like the adult females, but often have markings on the upper side of the abdomen.

Females lay eggs in a round or teardrop shaped sac which can hold around 200-400 eggs. A single female can lay between 4-9 egg sacs in a year. Depending on temperature and time of year, eggs usually hatch after about 20 days. Spiderlings stay near the egg sac for several days where they consume their brothers and sisters. Survivors throw a thread of silk to the wind and are carried off in a process called "ballooning". They eventually locate a sheltered spot where they build a loosely woven web and remain for the rest of their lives. As time progresses, widows build larger webs to capture larger prey. Males eventually leave their webs to find females for mating. In a natural setting, most females do not eat males after mating.



Widow spiders do not like being in the open. They can often be found outside in protected areas such as rainspouts, shrubbery, firewood piles or unused grills or BBQ pits. It is also possible to find them in garages, cellars, crawl spaces, attics, furniture, or electric or water meter boxes. Widows are shy creatures and often people are bitten when they accidentally disturb a web.

The bite of a black widow sometimes is not noticed, but when it is, it often feels like a pin prick. The bite location will have two red marks surrounded by redness and swelling. The bite reaction is systemic and intense pain usually occurs within 1-3 hours and continues for around 24 hours. Other symptoms include tremors, nausea, vomiting, leg cramps, abdominal pain, profuse perspiration and rise in blood pressure. It is also possible for breathing difficulties and unconsciousness to occur. If bitten by a black widow, immediately seek medical attention.

When working around the house or in the yard, it is best to wear leather gloves to avoid being bitten by venomous arthropods. The easiest way to remove widow spiders is with a vacuum. Make sure to shake out shoes, clothing and linens that have been in storage.

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas AgriLife Extension Service Program Specialist at 512.854.9600. Check out my blog at www.urban-ipm.blogspot.com

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