



# Information

Bohart Museum of Entomology

No. 001

## Black Widow Spider



Black Widows are large, distinctive spiders in the genus *Latrodectus*. *Latrodectus hesperus* is the commonest species in California and is found throughout the western United States. *Latrodectus mactans* is the black widow species found in the eastern states. Members of this genus are strongly sexually dimorphic -- females are large and shiny black, usually with a distinctive, although sometimes variable, hourglass shaped red mark on the underside of the abdomen. The legs are long and slender, tapering to a point at the end. Males are much smaller, and are brown, with light and dark striped markings. Males are rarely observed because of their small size and cryptic markings.

Widow spiders are found nearly worldwide. They are widespread in the United States, although they are most commonly encountered in the warmer southern states and coastal western states.

Black Widow spiders are common in and around homes, garages, barns and other manmade structures in California. They build a tough, messy-looking, three-dimensional web in or behind objects in secluded and protected locations. During the summer months they may also commonly be found

outside under shrubs and other garden plants, or near porch lights. Black Widow spiders often hang “belly up” on their webs, revealing the red mark on the ventral surface.

Once or twice per season a mature female may construct a pear shaped, white egg sac, containing 50-100 eggs. Females store sperm and so do not need to mate between egg-laying events. Incubation of the eggs takes approximately 30 days.

These spiders are excellent at controlling insects, particularly flies and crickets. A female Black Widow spider will feed on just about any small arthropod that encounters her web. This includes males and her own offspring who do not vacate the web quickly enough.

All *Latrodectus* spiders have painful and sometimes dangerous neurotoxic bites. In fact, these are the only spiders in the United States with neurotoxic venom. The bites cause extreme physical discomfort and illness for several days to a week and can only be treated symptomatically. Common symptoms include pain in the vicinity of the bite, muscle aches, severe abdominal pain, vomiting, muscular cramping, sweating, fever and headache. Oddly, the bite location itself may go unnoticed. There is usually no swelling at the site of the bite. Black Widow bites are rarely life threatening but may be particularly dangerous for small children or individuals with chronic health problems. There have been no deaths from the bite of this spider for decades. Black Widow bites can be dangerous for pets, and can be fatal to small dogs or cats. Control is not necessary unless a Black Widow is in an area frequented by people, particularly children, or by pets. It is important to remember that these are very shy spiders and never bite unless physically threatened.



Life-sized  
Black Widow