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COMMON SPIDERS IN THE LANDSCAPE

While their presence is generally unobtrusive and they pose no threat to humans, gardeners may be curious when encountering the more brightly marked or large-bodied species of spiders found in the northeast. Most of the following spiders belong to the family Araneidae, the orb-weavers. Orb-weavers create the archetypical wheel-shaped 'spider web.' These webs are used to ensnare flying insects. Bites from any of these spiders are rare, not medically significant, and the result of direct rough handling.

Yellow Garden Spider (*Argiope aurantia*): Also known as the 'writing spider,' 'zig-zag spider,' and 'zipper spider,' these large and brightly colored orb-weavers (Fig. 1) are known for creating distinctive zig-zag or zipper-like patterns of heavy silk in the center of their webs. This area on a web is called the 'stabilimentum.' Additionally, these spiders are diurnal (active during the daytime) and sit directly in the center of their webs.

Mature female garden spider bodies are an inch long and covered with bright yellow and black stripes. Males are about half the size and duller. Eggs are laid in large cases at the end of summer and overwinter. Spiderlings hatch from egg cases early the following spring. The spiders complete a full life cycle between spring and early winter. The large



Fig. 1: Yellow garden spider

webs are commonly found in fields and gardens, with tall grasses or other vertical objects serving as anchor points. If the webs are disturbed, the perched spiders may begin to 'bounce,' causing the entire web to rapidly wobble up and down. This behavior is thought to be a way to further entangle trapped prey or as a signal to large non-prey animals to stay away.

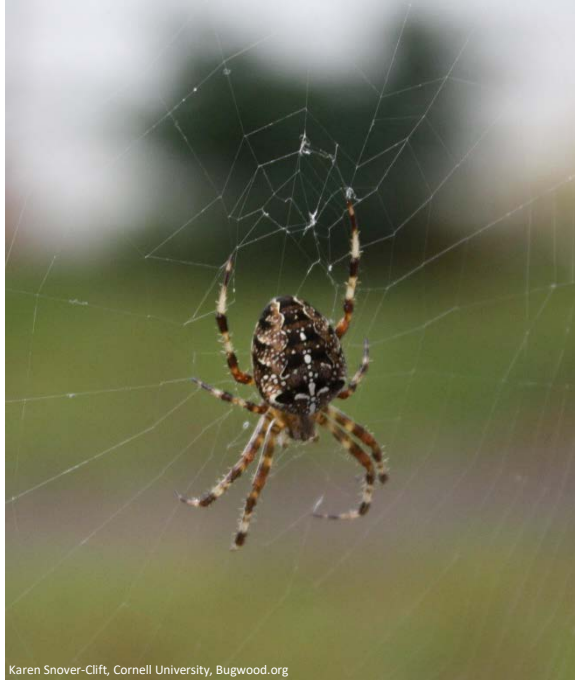


Fig. 2: Cross spider

Barn and Cross Spiders (genus *Araneus*): Orb-weaver spiders of the genus *Araneus* are widespread throughout North America, but the most frequently encountered species in New England are the barn and cross spiders. The barn spider gets its name from its association with barns and other open rural buildings (the titular character of the children's book *Charlotte's Web* written by E. B. White is a barn spider). The cross spider is named after the distinctive orange and white markings on its abdomen (Fig 2). Both species create circular webs in any landscape area that provides adequate anchorage points, and they regularly make use of man-made structures such as doorways, outdoor lighting, porches and on garden trellises, etc. Mature females of both species have a round $\frac{3}{4}$ inch wide body (the abdomen). They usually keep their legs tucked in. Males are much smaller, generally no more than $\frac{1}{3}$ rd the size of the females. These spiders are largely nocturnal and hide in crevices or shelters during the day. The orb-web is built at dusk and is used to snare night-flying

insects. They usually do not sit in the center of their webs, instead they hide to the side in a shelter with one leg resting on a line of the web. When they feel a slight vibration on the line they will launch onto the web to catch intended prey.

Araneus spiders live from spring through early winter. Egg sacs are laid during fall, after which the adult spider dies. The eggs overwinter inside the female spider's shelter. In the spring, hundreds of spiderlings emerge and immediately disperse. Spiderlings are incredibly lightweight, so they can quickly disperse using a behavior called 'ballooning.' They produce and hang onto long threads of silk which catch the wind like a sail, allowing the spiderling to float long distances.



Fig. 3: Orchard spider

Orchard Spider (*Leucauge venusta*): A close relative to the true orb-weavers, the orchard spider is a small and strikingly-marked spider ('venusta' means 'beautiful' in Latin) that is occasionally found in the landscape (Fig. 3). Adult females are one half to $\frac{3}{4}$ inches in size, with a shiny metallic silver abdomen striped with black, yellow and green. The legs and head area are yellowish green. These spiders build very small fine-threaded orb-shaped webs, and they perch in the middle. Often the spiders are seen before their webs are. Their primary prey is small flying insects.



Fig. 4: Spinybacked orbweaver

Spinybacked Orbweaver (*Gasteracantha cancriformis*):

This infrequent and striking species of spider is instantly distinguished from other North American spiders by its spiny abdomen that is wider than it is long and often brightly colored yellow, white, or orange with black (Fig. 4). Female are about ½ inch long, males are a third of that size.

These spiders are most frequently encountered in forest settings and open wooded areas. Their orb-shaped webs are frequently anchored to low tree branches or shrubs and bushes.

Spiders found outdoors do not require control. They are an integral part of the natural ecosystem and beneficial pest controllers in gardens and landscapes. Additionally, none of the spiders described in this guide have medically significant bites. Orbweaver spider bites are incredibly infrequent and generally the result of direct rough handling.