

Itsy Bitsy Spider!



Photo: Robbie Murphy

Above: The Garden Spider weaving its web

Mention spiders and a shiver runs down many peoples' backs! Most people think they are dangerous and wipe them away with a cloth, suck them up with the vacuum cleaner or squash them with a newspaper. Spiders do use poison or venom to kill their prey but Ireland doesn't have any spiders that are poisonous to humans. In fact, there are very few spiders that are known to be poisonous to humans. One such spider is the Black Widow Spider but none of these are native to Ireland!

Insects are the prey of spiders and spiders play a very important role in our ecosystem as they catch insects that can be annoying and harmful.

Spiders produce silk which they use to make houses, diving bells, cocoons, traps, parachutes and lifelines to save themselves if they fall. Organs called spinnerets, which are on their abdomens, or undersides, make the silk. At first the silk is a liquid and is made in certain glands in the body. This liquid is forced out through many little holes in the spinnerets and as soon as it reaches the air, the silk dries into a line that looks like a long strand of hair. This silk is sticky and it allows them to catch insects that brush against it. Most spiders spin webs to catch small flying insects such as flies, moths and butterflies. They poison their victims with venom from their fangs and wrap it in the silk threads to be eaten later.



Left: The Tarantula – Though the name Tarantula is often used to name many large spiders, the original “tarantulas” are found in southern Europe and are named after the city of Taranto in Italy.

Many people think spiders are insects. In fact they are not. They do, however, belong to the same group (or phylum) in the animal kingdom - Arthropoda (which consist of animals with segmented bodies and jointed legs or arms). Spiders belong to a group called Arachnids, and this group also includes scorpions and mites.

Insects vs. Spiders

- Insects usually have three pairs of legs - spiders have four pairs (making it eight legs!).
- The insect's body is segment into three parts - the spider's body has only two segments.
- Insects usually have two compound (complex) eyes - spiders have eight simple eyes.
- Insects usually have antennae - spiders do not.
- Insects usually have wings - spiders never do.
- Insects can eat plants - spiders never do.

Did you know...

- ...a spider sheds its skin a number of times throughout its life. This is called moulting. The new skin hardens each time.
- ...that if a spider breaks a leg in a fight, it can grow a new one when it moults.
- ...spiders will eat other spiders!
- ...a person studying spiders is called an arachnologist.
- ...baby spiders are called spiderlings.
- ...a spider can lay up to 2,000 eggs in their reproductive sac.
- ...spiders do not have an inner skeleton but an exoskeleton (a skeleton on the outside).
- ...there are more than 30,000 different types of spiders known to man!
- ...spiders taste and smell with their feet.
- ...spiders don't have teeth, they have fangs.
- ...their fangs hold their poison, which they use to paralyse and kill their victims!
- ...triangle, orb, funnel, tangled and sheet are all names for webs.
- ...the thread of silk a spider hangs from is called a dragline.
- ...claws and pads on their legs enable spiders to run up walls and along ceilings.