

## The Tour of Bugs

During a recent walk through the Garden of the Sun to identify spiders and bugs, I witnessed a Black Widow spider giving a lethal dose of venom to a large metallic looking potato bug. The bug and the spider displayed themselves in full view inside an exposed planter box.

My fascination did not stop there.

The walk, lead by George Heaton, Horticulture instructor from Reedley Community College, was beneficial in terms of learning to identify good bugs, bad bugs and other living creatures of the garden.

Looking at the best colored photographs to identify insects and spiders will never measure up to stepping into a garden and seeing them first hand.

My interest in spiders and bugs is not easily squelched. What I once believed was a spider mite, i.e. a menacing garden predator, turned out to be a harmless garden variety spider. Later, I unknowingly rubbed up against a flower that did, in fact, have red spider mites. I could easily have carried these nearly microscopic pests on my clothing back to my home garden had George not said, "Watch it!" He then plainly showed me where I had placed my arm in relation to the little red piles of mites that were fastened to the plant leaves.

Being a Master Gardener does not mean I am an entomologist, a botanist, a landscape designer or a farmer. It does mean I have been through a 16 week course on horticulture related topics, sponsored by University of California Cooperative Extension. It also means I have taken and passed a 4 hour test that required answering questions related to pest management, basic botany, plant terminology, composting, soil, pesticides, turf management, fertilizers, fruit and landscape trees, pruning, fungi, vegetables and diagnosing plant disease. In addition, it means that I have access to experts in various plant related fields. These experts can answer questions that perhaps, I cannot.

Additionally, this means that I have scientifically based information available to me, assuming I can find it, that is retrieved on your request.

Most Master Gardeners make an honest effort to answer the call-in or write-in questions accurately. Sometimes we are stumped by a question that we are asked. This might mean we need additional time to research the answer.

More often, the questions asked are repeat questions, that is, questions that have been asked and answered many times. If we don't have an answer, and occasionally the experts don't have an answer either, we keep looking for one.

Every time I enter a garden, it is an occasion to get a question answered.

In a garden, I have an opportunity to keep on learning about spiders, bugs, plants, soil, and my environment. Before I step on a spider or squish a bug, I want to get a good look at it. I want to find out about its cycles, habits, food choices, and the problems or benefits it offers. I want to find out the best and worst of its nature.

As I enter a garden, I know something in it is changing, or has changed from the time before. Perhaps, it is more accurate to say that something in me is changing or has changed from the time before. As I enter a garden I see an essential opportunity to discover life. I can do this lifting a leaf and looking at one spider or one bug at a time.

*This column is provided by the University Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program in Madera County. The Master Gardener program extends research based information in home horticulture and pest management, verified by University of California experts to the citizens of our state. Call you U.C. Cooperative Extension Office in Madera with your gardening questions at 559-675-7879 Ext.204 to leave a msg, or stop by the office on Mondays from 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. to speak to a Master Gardener in person. Ramona Frances can be reached at [garden@psnw.com](mailto:garden@psnw.com).*

