



Large House spiders: big and beautiful

by Geoff Oxford



This is the time of year when screams are heard from the bathroom, and shrieks issue from those watching TV. Late summer and early autumn are when Large House spiders are on the move. These large, brown, long-legged and hairy spiders (*Tegenaria* species) usually choose secluded spots in which to build their sheet-like webs, which have a tubular retreat in one corner. So, for most of the year, they are found in the sheltered nooks and crannies of sheds and garages and behind furniture in houses.

In late summer males mature, leave their webs and set out to look for a female. This is why they are so obvious at this time – the majority of spiders you see trapped in sinks and baths, or legging it across carpets, are males on the prowl. Males have swollen palps (pedipalps) at the front end that look like miniature boxing gloves. The palps of females, on the other hand, are not swollen and look like an extra pair of short legs.





Once a male has found a female's web he tells her he is there by vibrating the silk with his fangs, abdomen and legs in a special way, telling her he is not her next meal. Once mating has taken place the male often sets up house in the female's web to make sure no other males mate with her. Over the winter the male dies. The next spring, when temperatures and food supply both increase, the female starts to produce a series of egg sacs, each containing 70 or so eggs. The egg sacs are about the size of a small-finger nail and are often decorated with bits of fly – the remains of her meals.

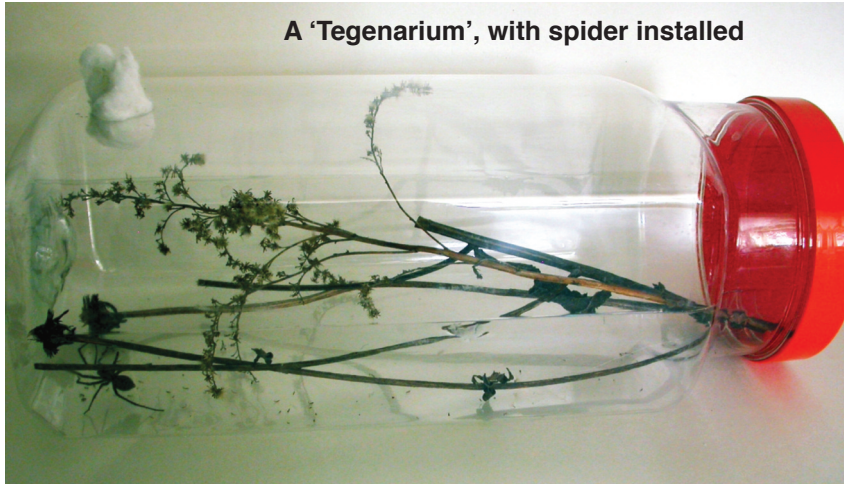
In about a month, in late spring, the powder-blue young emerge and after a few weeks begin to disperse. They will grow to about half the adult size in their first year and then over-winter, resuming growth to maturity in the following summer. On average, males live for about 18 months and females for about 30 months.

Which species of Large House spider you have in your home depends on where you live. If you are in eastern England or the Midlands, your lodger will be *Tegenaria gigantea*, but if you live in Wales and the south-west you will have *Tegenaria saeva* (these spiders don't have separate common names). In northern England (Yorkshire and Lancashire northwards) you may have either species or, indeed, a hybrid between them. If you live in the Newcastle upon Tyne area, you may even share your house with a third species, *Tegenaria atrica*. All three species look identical, and have to be separated by examining their reproductive organs.

Large House spiders make excellent temporary pets. The best way to keep one is in a plastic sweet jar with a



small hole cut in a side near the bottom end – you could call this spider house a ‘Tegenarium’.



Plug the hole with cotton wool. Lay the jar on its side (hole uppermost) and put in some twigs to give the spider something to support its web on. Next catch your spider. You may come across one if your Mum or Dad are cleaning out a garden shed, or look out for a male running across the floor. When it stops, put a drinking glass or empty yogurt pot over it and slide a piece of thin card under the glass/pot, trapping the spider inside. Add it to your ‘Tegenarium’ through the open end and then screw on the lid. Let the spider settle for a day or so before offering it flies. These can be put through the small hole and the cotton wool replaced. The container needs to be lightly wetted once a week with water from a plant sprayer – this too can be done through the small feeding hole.

You will definitely be able to study web-building and feeding behaviour and, depending on the sex and stage of your spider, you may also observe moulting, and perhaps





egg laying and the emergence of the young. Young spiders are difficult to feed (they need very small insects) so it is better to let them go at that stage.



Large House spider egg sac with fly decorations

HOUSE SPIDER MYTHS

1. House spiders come indoors in the autumn to get out of the cold.

No, they don't - as explained in Geoff's article, they are already indoors! The males wander about in the autumn, looking for females.



2. House spiders should be put outside, because that's where they want to be. Wrong, of course - they are house spiders - the clue is in the name!

3. House spiders are dangerous to pets and children. They are not - they only eat small insects. Just ask any spider!

OTHER SPIDER MYTHS

You are never more than three feet from a spider.

No-one knows how far the nearest spider is - it depends where you happen to be standing!

All spiders make webs.

Not so - some hunt their prey. These include wolf spiders, crab spiders, jumping spiders and trapdoor spiders.

DID YOU KNOW?

People often think that, when a Large House spider stops in the middle of a room, they are working out which way to run. In fact, they are just 'out of breath'. They can run very fast but only for a short distance before they have to stop and recover, rather like a cheetah.

Why do they appear in baths and sinks? They certainly don't come up the plughole, as many people think; the drain beneath has a U-bend full of water. When males are looking for females they don't eat or drink, and they get thirsty. They are found in sinks and baths because, while seeking droplets of water, they fall in and can't climb up the slippery sides. The bath acts like a giant pitfall trap. Draping a towel over the side to act as a ladder will ensure no early-morning fuss from someone who doesn't like spiders!