



PHOTO BY D. L. Hamilton

We have become so frightened by unpleasant stories of spiders or by movies about spiders gone wild that most of us have lost the idea that spiders can serve a beneficial role. If you ever have an occasion to come across one of their large webs filled with the carcasses of Texas-sized mosquitoes and other small biting flyers—you're may develop a new found admiration and appreciation of the Banana Spider (shown above)!

Q: This spider is in my yard in League City. It has made a huge web and it is attached to my palm tree. Do you know what kind of spider it is? It is big and scary looking!

A: Oh how communications have changed since I started as an Extension Horticulture Agent in 1989. A common means of addressing gardeners' questions is now through e-mail. It's especially ef-

fective when accompanied with one or more high-quality digital photos of the subject in question.

Before the advent of e-mail, I would have to rely on verbal descriptions provided by the caller. If the "offender" at hand was a wasp, bee, snake or something else that buzzes, slivers or otherwise evokes our inner fears (especially spiders), the descriptions tended to

be amped up a bit like a fisherman's tale of the one that got away.

The above question was printed verbatim as it appeared in the e-mail to me and contained not one but two very high-quality photos. Case solved: The photo was that of a female Banana Spider (*Nephila clavipes*), one of the largest species that occur in our area. The Banana Spider is a brightly colored spe-



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cies of the orb-web spider family.

Nephila comes from Ancient Greek, meaning “fond of spinning.” Most people call them Banana or Golden Silk spiders but other common names are Calico Spider, Giant Wood Spider, Golden Silk Orb Weaver and Writing Spiders. The ‘golden’ refers to the color of the silk, not the color of the spider, for the web of a mature female has yellow threads which look like rich gold in the sunshine.

The Banana Spider occurs in warm regions, from North Carolina and across the Gulf States through Central America, as far south as Argentina, and in the West Indies and extensively throughout Puerto Rico. Banana Spiders like high humidity and relatively open space. They inhabit forest areas along trails and clearing edges including city and county parks.

Banana Spider females are about 3 inches long (including legs) and their color pattern consists of a silvery carapace (outer body wall) with yellow spots on a muted orange to tan cylindrical body. Her long legs are banded brown and orange with feathery tufts or gaiters on the lower segment, making this spider one of the most easily recognized.

The slender males, on the other hand, are a rather inconspicuous dark brown averaging less than a ½ inch in length and would often go unnoticed if not for the fact that they are often found in the webs of females.

The striking difference between the sexes is known as sexual dimorphism. Sexual dimorphism is when the male and female of the same spider species have physical characteristics so different that they appear not to be the same species. Sexual dimorphism is most obvious when the spiders are mature.

The strong web of the Banana Siders is complex. It is a fine-meshed orb suspended in a maze of non-sticky “barrier webs.” They make big webs, about 3 feet wide, spun in a place best-suited to take advantage of the flight paths of other insects.

Some scientists suggest that the silk’s color serves a dual purpose: sunlit webs ensnare bees that are attracted to the bright yellow strands and in shady spots, the yellow blends in with background foliage, acting as camouflage.

Typically, the webs are constructed in open woods or edges of dense forest, usually attached to trees and low shrubs, although they may be in tree tops or between the wires of utility lines. In relation to the ground, webs are woven anywhere from eye-level upwards into a tree canopy.

The banana spider preys on a wide variety of small to medium sized flying insects, which include mosquitoes, grasshoppers, stinkbugs, leaf-footed bugs, bees, flies, small moths and wasps. Banana spiders have even been seen feeding on beetles and

dragonflies.

Oddly, some banana spiders are reported to display an almost manic fear of cockroaches. It is thought the cockroach’s fast movements and large, dark shape cause some of the species to run from or ignore a perfectly good meal.

Because of its size, people sometimes assume that the banana spider is dangerous to people. In reality, it is a shy spider (as nearly all spiders are). Just know this species is considered medically harmless to humans.

There is little danger to a healthy adult from an encounter with the banana spider. It will only bite if held or pinched and the bite itself will produce a localized pain with a slight redness, which quickly goes away.

Yes, it may require a certain amount of time for most humans to take a liking to spiders—or at least to reduce their level of disgust or fear. However, if you ever have an occasion to witness some of their beneficial works—especially when you come across one of their large webs filled with the carcasses of Texas-sized mosquitoes and other small biting flyers—you’re likely to develop a new found admiration and appreciation of the Banana Spider!

