

Spiders and Snakes and Bats – Oh, My! Spooky Halloween Critters are Your Friends in the Garden

Photo courtesy of Kathy Keatley Garvey, University of CA at Davis

By Michele Rugo, *University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener for Calaveras County*

Some of the most iconic Halloween symbols that can make one's blood run cold are spiders, snakes, bats, toads and worms. Batman of DC Comics and movie fame is said to have chosen the bat as his personal trademark in order to strike fear into the hearts of criminals. Though often misunderstood in folklore and myth, many of the creatures associated with Halloween actually do a great deal of good in the garden.

Spiders

Crawling their way into two out of three American homes, spiders are among the most numerous of household pests. Couple that with the fact that one of the most common phobias is arachnophobia or fear of spiders, it's no wonder that most homeowners tend to employ the handiest DIY method of pest control like a nearby broom when they encounter one.

While many of us may be unwilling to live with an abundance of spiders in our homes, there are many reasons to encourage them in the garden – within reason. All spiders are voracious predators; rather than eating plants, they feast on other living animals which in turn feed on plants and flowers. Earwigs, flies and even slugs are tasty treats to the average backyard spider. Unfortunately, so are beneficial insects like honeybees, butterflies and preying mantids busy trying to pollinate or keep your aphid population in check.

Using mulch, planting tall plants and leaving a few crates or empty pots around will encourage web building and nests. Just be careful not to overdo it as spiders will rapidly colonize in a hospitable environment and do away with all bugs, both good and bad. Be advised that spiders are notoriously slow breeders so don't count on them to solve a seemingly overnight explosion of a garden pest; seek other bio-friendly methods such as handpicking and organic sprays.

Snakes

Pity the much maligned garden snake. Most snakes in the United States are nonpoisonous and relatively harmless. They are also very clean animals and carry few diseases transmittable to humans. Cold-blooded vertebrates have no way of controlling their body temperature other than through the environment. It's why a snake can often be found lying in a path or on a rock on a sunny day – not looking to attack but rather trying to warm itself or digest a recent meal.

Since they are legless, snakes are able to move about quietly, disturbing little in the natural environment and entering the smallest holes and areas where beetles and rodents may be hiding. Contrary to popular belief, they do not create holes but instead travel through existing ones of gophers, mice and other animals in search of their prey. Though rattlesnakes should obviously be avoided by you and pets, far more people in this country have lost fingers or become seriously ill from cat bites than the defensive bite of a rattler. Our local King and rat snakes are great rodent hunters and the Kings also feed on young rattlesnakes. Though we tend to thank our domesticated cats for this effort, snakes do far more in keeping the rodent population under control than Fluffy.

Bats

Like humans, bats are mammals and the only ones that can fly. Despite the old adage "blind as a bat," they have excellent eyesight. Most species tend to form large colonies in caves, tree snags, in the eaves of barns and buildings, and under roof tiles or bridges. Females generally give birth to only one or two babies each year. When disturbed they will instinctively flee their roost, sometimes abandoning their offspring in their desperation to escape. Active at night and resting during the day, bats use echolocation - a kind of built-in sonar - to hunt after dark. A bat feasting on mosquitoes, moths, beetles and other flying insects will eat about half its body weight in a single night. A typical colony of 100 bats feeding in an area for six months can consume more than 2,200 pounds of insects or a whopping 600 million bugs!

It's important to remember that despite their folkloric link to vampires, there are only three species of bats that actually consume blood and all are located in Latin America. Another persistent myth is that bats spread rabies. All mammals can contract rabies but the number of bats affected in the U.S. is less than one half of one percent, all of which means one is more likely to come down with leprosy or the plague than get rabies from a bat. Loss of habitat to development, human disturbance of colonies, overuse of pesticides and deliberate eradication attempts have dramatically reduced bat populations in recent years. Rather than being fearful of these insect-eating dynamos,

encourage their colonization by providing wooden nesting boxes or simply leaving them alone.

Toads

No, toads do not transmit warts by handling but many a foothills gardener is startled to discover one buried in their garden. In a single night a large toad can consume as many as 100 cutworms, snails or slugs, making them an important part of a healthy, pesticide-free landscape.

Hunted by skunks, snakes, hawks and other predatory birds, one can understand why a toad spends its day under a few inches of topsoil, old boards or rocks. Dogs and cats are less of an issue as they quickly are repelled by their taste. You can devise a classier toad hole using a concrete drain pipe set at an angle into rock or beneath a dry stone wall leading to a pocket of soft sand. Place it so the toad can emerge into a sheltered area of tall grass or shrubbery hidden from predators. Should you encounter toads on your driveway when returning home after dark, consider yourself lucky indeed. Toads do not just take up residence anywhere and they, too, are accomplished insect eaters.

Earthworms

Whether in a child's classroom or at your favorite plant nursery, you've probably been introduced to the benefits of earthworms in composting. The pale red garden earthworm is also a super soil creator, pushing through soft earth with the point of its head and leaving behind nitrogen and nutrient-rich excrement called castings. If the soil is hard, the worm eats its way through, loosening the dirt and allowing air and water to enter and help roots grow. Earthworms are very sensitive to changes in their environment and will quickly flee the salty conditions resulting from the use of chemical fertilizers. Don't be repelled by their occasional appearance above ground after a heavy rain - having earthworms in your garden is a sign of good soil. Encourage them through the use of compost and eliminate pesticides or use sparingly.

Spiders, snakes, bats, toads and worms are the stuff of some people's nightmares but they shouldn't be. From eating garden pests to enriching the soil, each plays a beneficial role for the home gardener. Maintaining a habitat as well as mindset that supports them will reward you with a healthy, balanced garden and one that relies on nature rather than the use of chemical fertilizers and poisons.

For more information or help with foothills gardening call 754-2880, email mastergardener@co.calaveras.ca.us or visit ucanr.edu/sites/CalaverasCountyMasterGardeners. Links can be found to these and other beneficial garden friends.