

Creepy, crawly ... and excellent pets

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Posted: Oct 1, 2007
Updated: Sep. 27, 2008

Spiders and black [cats](#) and bats - the creepy fauna of Halloween. They all make great decorations, but you'd probably be surprised that more than one of them makes a good household pet.

Tarantulas are easy to care for, and their fearsome reputation is vastly exaggerated.

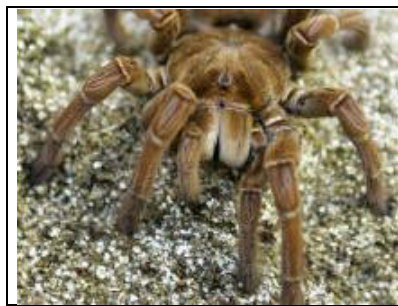
"I hear it all the time: What are you doing with those around? What if it got out? It could kill somebody," says Mark Jones, who with his wife Beth runs Chaos and Critters exotic animal rescue in Mobile, Alabama

But in fact, these large spiders aren't as dangerous as that.

"They will not kill you," Jones says. "You'd have to have a severe allergy to insect venom. Some of them, the bites are no worse than a mosquito."

Some species have hairs that they use as defense; these are extremely irritating, and you especially don't want to get one in your eye. But aside from this caution, tarantulas are interesting [pets](#), and extremely low maintenance.

"A well fed and watered tarantula can be left for a month when you go on vacation," says Michael Jacobi of tarantulas.com, a breeder and dealer with 25 years of experience.



A Goliath Birdeater Tarantula Spider is shown in this close-up view Sept. 26, 2007 at Tarantulas.com in Edmonds, Wash., near Seattle. Breeders say that the spiders are easy to care for as pets, and their fearsome reputation is vastly exaggerated. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

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On a routine basis, tarantulas need little more than a spritz of water to maintain humidity in their enclosure and a few crickets once in a while - although you should remove uneaten food, which can injure the spider when it's molting. And they don't need large cages to wander in, so they don't take up much space.

"They're a very nice [pet](#) for people who don't want to be bothered with something running around, getting on the furniture, making a lot of noise," says Jones. "They don't smell, they have no odor whatsoever."

OK, so they aren't much work - but what's the payoff? You can't cuddle them and they won't come when you call their name. But according to Jones, "They're great observational pets. Some of them construct extremely elaborate webs. Some of them excavate a tunnel and construct a trap door over it."

Linda Rayer, professor of entomology at Cornell University, agrees.

"Just like you're not petting your fish, you're not going to be petting your tarantula, but they're interesting to watch," she says. "Tarantulas are calming for me in the same kind of way."

What makes them great to observe, Rayer says, is that they are wild animals that behave fairly naturalistically in captivity, including their feeding behaviors.

"Friday, it's been a long week, you feed your tarantulas - they're really good at what they do, and what they do is they're predators. I like watching tarantulas capture prey."

And - surprising as you may find it - their owners say they are beautiful.

"There are lots of different colors and different varieties," says Jacobi. "There are 850 species of tarantula, and well over 100 available in the hobby."

Even just the names can be lovely: who could resist a Pink Zebra [Beauty](#)?

Both Rayer and Jacobi recommend not handling your tarantula - even if a bite won't kill you, handling stresses the animal, and it can easily die from a fall. But if you're careful, they can live for years, as long as you're aware of one crucial fact: a spider that is in the process of molting lies on its back, looking quite dead.

"Don't throw it out," says Jones. "If your spider's lying on its back, leave it there for a week. It's the only way to be sure."

As a species for beginners, Rayer recommends the strikingly marked Mexican redknee and its relations. They are "just great, reasonably active, not aggressive. All the things you want in a nice tarantula."

And according to Jacobi, all redknees are captive bred - they are a protected species and can't be collected from the wild - so there are no environmental concerns about owning one.

"Spiders are way cooler than they are creepy," says Rayer, who does [educational programs](#) on spiders for schools, and says that demand is high around Halloween.

But the creepy aspect can be part of the fun. At Club Soda on Block Island, Rhode Island, the bar mascot is a Brazilian bird-eating tarantula called Itchy, according to manager Kate Musso.

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"Everyone is freaked out by it," she says.

Even so, Itchy needs some help if he's really going to terrify people.

"We bought a fake remote controlled tarantula and we can make it run across the bar. We show people the real one and then they turn around and see the fake one," says Musso.

"Grown men scream like little girls."

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