

An Interview with *Tetranychus Urticae*

By Robert B. Martin Jr.

During the year, rose societies present speakers monthly to address many aspects of rose culture. With the advent of summer, it occurred to me that during this time of year there appears in our rose gardens a prominent resident who, because of its size, has yet to appear at a meeting. I am speaking of the spider mite. To remedy this neglect I have undertaken to interview *Tetranychus Urticae* — the “two spotted spider mite”. There follows a report of this interview.

Although *Tetranychus Urticae* proved difficult to see, even with a large magnifying glass, I had little difficulty locating his many companions in their silk webs amid several yellowed leaves on our ‘Rose de Rescht’. The leaves had what might be described as a “salt and pepper” appearance. They had also built a large canopy of webs covering several adjacent blooms.

I found *Tetranychus* sipping on plant juice — a practice he continued throughout the interview pausing only long enough for a polite answer to my questions. In appearance I found *Tetranychus* to be quite unusual in spite of his rather small stature. His flattened oval body was less than 1/32 of an inch in diameter, however the pair of fang like appendages in front of his mouth were impressive. He appeared to have little color although a pale green or yellow with dark spots may be a more accurate description. The weather being unusually pleasant, as it has through most of the spring, I turned first to this subject.

Reporter: “*Tetranychus* — I realize that a discussion of the weather may seem trivial in beginning an important interview, but since the weather has been so unusually mild this spring, I was wondering if you’d care to comment on it?”

Tetranychus: “Certainly. The weather has been a subject of considerable interest to us this spring. Ordinarily, my friends and I like to visit



Entire Lavaglut bush covered with webbing, particularly in a full canopy effect over the many sprays. Has “Spidie” been to your garden?

the garden in the summer months. Winters are very hard on us and most of us die of the winter cold. But the weather this spring has been nicely dry and warm, giving us a good start on the summer months.”

Reporter: “Is this a matter of preference or is there some benefit to your species from the heat?”

Tetranychus: “Both. We tend to prefer heat, but not sunshine — mind you — which explains why we are all gathered in the shade provided by the underside of these leaves. The heat assists in the rapid development of our young. Under the best weather conditions our families can produce as many as ten generations within a successful growing season.”

Reporter: “At the risk of prying into personal matters, perhaps you might care to describe to our readers your reproductive practices?”

Tetranychus: “Well — it’s nothing too exciting, but it is a little complicated. Our females lay eggs that hatch in 5 to 8 days, depending on the weather. Our infants are called the protonymph stage and later molt into juveniles in the deutonymph

stage. Both nymph stages have four legs. Then they reach the adult stage with 8 legs. The time from egg to adult normally requires about 3 weeks, but takes less time if the weather is nicely hot and dry. I should add we are quite proud of our eggs and youngsters, as they are unusually strong. When humans try to kill us, they often survive while the adults do not.”

Reporter: “Anything else unusual about your sex life?”

Tetranychus: “Not really — our males do like to protect unmated females by shooting silk to ward off competitors — but I suspect this is about as unusual as we get.”

Reporter: “I’ve noticed as we’ve been speaking, that you seem to be enjoying the plant juice you’ve been sucking on. Is this your typical diet?”

Tetranychus: “Yes — that and plant tissue. We enjoy plant tissue and juices from a variety of indoor and outdoor plants. In fact, when cooler weather arrives we often move indoors. You will notice we are quite serious feeders and are generally

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motionless during meals — at least until we're disturbed."

Reporter: "I've noticed quite a number of yellowed leaves surrounding you — is that caused by your feeding?"

Tetranychus: "Oh yes. Our feeding tends to yellow the leaves and cause them to drop off. Fortunately, there seems to be an ample supply in the garden here. Like your writer, Horatio Alger, we like to start at the bottom and work our way up. But when the weather is really nice, like it has been lately, the crowds get so big that we finish off the leaves on a rose bush in two or three days. That is — unless we're disturbed."

Reporter: "You've mentioned being 'disturbed' several times. You don't like being disturbed I gather?"

Tetranychus: "No we don't. We're easily disturbed which causes us to run crazy over our webs."

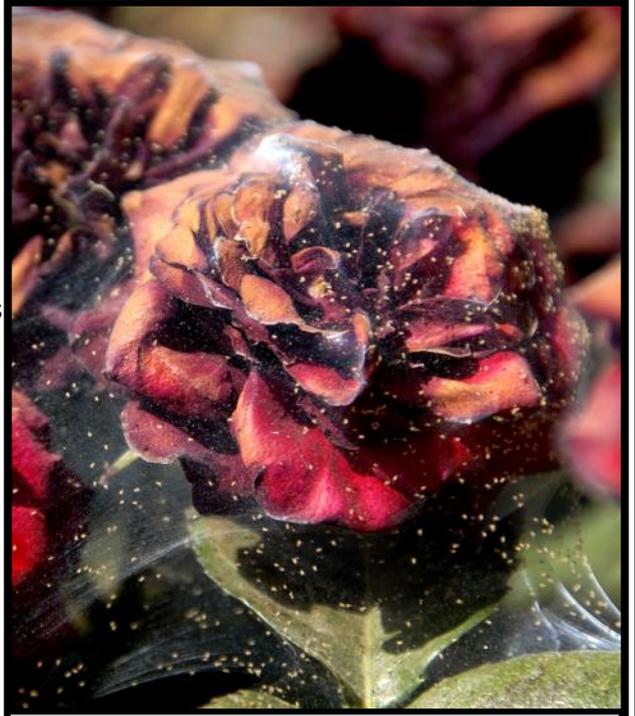
Reporter: "What causes you and your friends to become 'disturbed'?"

Tetranychus: "Well, there are a number of things. We usually get

pretty excited with the mating business 'cause we have this thing, maybe it's a scent, or something — I think I heard somewhere that it's called a "pheromone" — that really gets us excited and running around. But what bugs us is that we've found some gardeners have been spraying a synthetic version of it called "Stirrup M" and then cruelly mixing it with poisons, so we get all excited and run around in the poison, causing many more deaths in our population."

Reporter: "Anything else?"

Tetranychus: "Well, I should mention that we are really annoyed by water. I'm not speaking of water directed from above, as our preference for the underside of leaves generally protects us from rain or overhead watering. However, water in a hard, fine stream



From the Martin Arizona garden, unfortunately!
Photos by Dona Martin

directed from the bottom tends to knock off most of us and drown quite a few." But as I have said, our eggs and youngsters are pretty tough and often survive."

Reporter: "I take it then that you are not fond of water wands?"

Tetranychus: "Absolutely not — hate the things."

Reporter: "How about soap?"

Tetranychus: "Funny you should mention that. We've noticed some older humans toss their dishwasher on us. However, this has little effect other than to temporarily disturb our feeding."

Reporter: "How about insecticides?"

Tetranychus: "Doesn't bother us much — we are not insects. The water it is mixed in is annoying though. If you want to kill us, you'll have to use a miticide, but don't tell anyone that because most gardeners don't know the difference."



Floribunda Amazing Grace, also covered with thick, glossy webbing and spider mites rampant inside the webs. After deadheading and cleaning with water wand, Floramite w/Stirrup M was applied. Mites are gone.

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Reporter: "Since you're known as a 'spider' mite does this mean you are related to spiders?"

Tetranychus: "Absolutely. Like spiders, we are considered arachnids. Did you know that we are the largest non-insect class, with over 75,000 named species worldwide?"

Reporter: "No I didn't. Anyway, my time is running short. Would you care to comment on your future plans?"

Tetranychus: "Well personally I intend to continue enjoying this juice — in fact, I think I'll catch a web over to the next leaf there — where, if the humans are willing, I'll continue to enjoy the summer days."

Reporter: "Good-bye then. Thank you for the interview."

Tetranychus: "Don't mention it — I've enjoyed our visit. By the way, you should mention to your readers that we've been around for over 350 million years. I would suspect therefore, it would not be presumptuous for me to say — we'll be around."

Reporter: "I'm sure you will be."

[Editor's Note: Products available for "spidemergencies" are available from some nurseries. The biggest selection can be seen online at www.Rosemania.com, including Stirrup M and the newest miticide, SHUTTLE 15 SC. This product eliminates all generations of mites, including eggs, and does not cause the development of resistance in the mites.]



Internet photos

