

## Care guide

### St. Andrew's Cross Spider, *Argiope keyserlingi*



St. Andrew's Cross Spiders are colourfully banded and are well known for the white silk cross they make in the centre of the round 'orb' webs. This cross is called a stablimentum and is believed to have two functions. The first is to attract insects to the web by reflecting ultra violet light, and the second is to scare off predators such as birds. These spiders sit on their webs with their legs in pairs, each pair aligned with the arms of the cross.

St. Andrew's Cross Spiders are found over much of eastern Australia, including suburban backyards. Their webs are permanent fixtures, and the spider can often be found repairing the web after catching a meal. Their legs are covered in sensory hairs that are very sensitive to air movement. When disturbed, these spiders will drop quickly from their web, or 'trampoline' on their web, bouncing up and down to deter predators or to dislodge something from their web.

This species lays its eggs encased within a greenish pear shaped egg sac off the side of their web. The egg sac can contain around 300 eggs. The young emerge 30 - 60 days after being laid (they will develop faster in warmer conditions) and several hundred spiderlings may emerge from a single egg sac. The spiderlings will cluster around the egg sac for several days before they disperse. Once they disperse chance meetings of the siblings may result in one eating the other.

These spiders grow by shedding their outer skeleton (exoskeleton). This process is called ecdysis or moulting. To moult successfully they need to hang uninterrupted from their web. Their colour darkens and they stop feeding a few days before moulting, and once they begin to moult they usually complete the process in about 10 minutes. They usually will not feed for about 24 hours after moulting. Males and females can be identified as they mature; males are about a tenth of the size of the females and have enlarged bulbs on the ends of their pedipalps (feelers) which females lack.

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**Food:** Live insects. Crickets, cockroaches, moths and flies are ideal. The food insects should be no larger than 1/3 of the size of your spider. As this is a web-building spider, prey is best offered by being trapped in the spider's web. Feeding twice a week is recommended, but young spiders will feed more often when they are growing.

**Water:** Mist spray lightly around your spider every second day – it will drink the droplets from the web.

**Enclosure:** These spiders do well within mesh enclosures, as it allows enough space for the spider to construct the web without allowing the spider to wander away. A suitable enclosure would be no smaller than 30cx30cmx30cm. These spiders can also be encouraged to set up a web in an 'orb-frame' – a free standing frame with two branches protruding from a base. For more information, refer to "Bugs Alive – A Guide to keeping Australian invertebrates". To set the spider up in this frame, let the spider attach its silk to one branch, then slowly guide her (on your hand or a stick) to the opposite branch to attach a line of silk between the two branches.

**Temperature:** The safe temperature zone for this species is 18° – 26°C, but will tolerate 8°– 30° for limited periods.

**Life span:** 1-2 years.

**Handling:** These spiders can be handled gently. They are mildly venomous, but not aggressive and are reluctant to bite. When handled they are most likely to drop to the ground quickly and attempt to run away, however these spiders are clumsy on the ground and should be easy to catch again.

**Reproduction:** Release a male on the outermost edge of the web (the support lines). This will allow him to make his way to the female in his own time, and lessen the risk of him being mistaken for a meal. He will mate by moving to the females' underside so he can reach her genital opening with his pedipalps. The female will produce a greenish egg sac to the side of her web. When the spiderlings emerge after around 30-60 days, they are tiny and difficult to feed, so you will need to have small vinegar flies or similar to feed them.

**Common issues:** If kept in the open, these spiders may wander when exposed to drafts (by releasing silk drift lines) and may end up with webs in unexpected positions. They are energetic feeders and will often begin to wrap up food along with forceps (or any tool used to place food in the web) before you have released it.

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