



CARE GUIDE



# TROPICAL ST. ANDREW'S CROSS SPIDER

*Argiope aetherea*



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# TROPICAL ST. ANDREW'S CROSS SPIDER

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### PROFILE

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 thickened patch of silk is called a stabilimentum and was originally named due to a misbelief that it stabilised the web. While the actual role is still under scrutiny, it is now considered to have two benefits; preventing accidental damage caused by birds flying through the webs, and potentially attracting insects to the web by reflecting ultra violet light. These spiders sit on their webs with their legs in pairs, each pair aligned with the lines of the cross.

Tropical St. Andrew's Cross Spiders are found over much of northern Australia, from northern New South Wales to Far North Queensland, 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 around 30 days after being laid (they may develop slower in cool 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.

## 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. Remove live insects from your enclosure if your spider has not eaten them within 12 hours.

## 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 30cm x 30cm x 30cm. 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.

## CLEANING AND MAINTENANCE

Remove any food waste that has fallen to the bottom of the enclosure.

## SUBSTRATE

Not essential, but you can use leaf litter, sphagnum moss or coco-peat for display purposes or to help increase humidity within the enclosure.

## 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.

## TEMPERATURE

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

## 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.



60-80%



Around a year life span



These animals are captive bred, and should not be released into the wild

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