

Tent caterpillar troublesome

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One of the most frequent spring feeding insects troublesome to the home gardener is the Eastern tent caterpillar (*Malscosoma americana* F.). The presence of this insect pest is obvious from defoliation and the formation of large unsightly silk "tents".

Favorite host plants are wild cherry and apple, although tent caterpillars attack a wide variety of deciduous trees and shrubs including flowering cherry, crabapple, plum, peach, oak, birch, hawthorn, privet and linden. When excessively abundant, trees may be completely defoliated.

Tent caterpillars spend winter in the egg stage. Eggs

are laid in large masses containing 300-400 eggs per cluster. The cluster usually forms a broad band encircling a small twig or branch. The entire egg mass is covered by a brownish gluey substance which protects the cluster and holds it to the twig. Egg clusters are often mistaken for cocoons or galls on the twigs. When the first buds open in the spring, eggs hatch and the young larvae begin to feed on expanding buds.

As larvae develop, they feed voraciously on the foliage. The larvae are social and those hatching from a single egg cluster remain together to construct a silk "tent" or "web". The tent is small initially but enlarges gradually, sometimes to nearly two feet in length. Tents are commonly found in

the crotch systems of the main branches of a tree or shrub.

The larvae forage for food during the warmer part of the day and in the evening when it is not too cold. They return to their tents when storms, rain or heat provide unfavorable conditions for feeding. Full grown larvae are about two inches long, black with a light stripe down the back and dots of blue and white along the sides. They are covered with fine, soft, yellowish hairs. The larvae mature in June and wander off individually from the tent to a protected site where they pupate in a loosely woven cocoon.

The cocoon is oval, white in color, dusted with a yellowish powder and held in place by a few irregular coarse threads. The pupal period lasts about

three weeks, then the adults emerge. The adult moth emerges between the last week of June and first week in July, the eggs are laid soon after. The moths are dull, reddish-brown, marked on the front wing by nearly oblique whitish lines and have a wing span of approximately two inches. Only one generation is produced each year. The egg stage lasts from July until the following April.

Egg masses are readily visible on small trees and shrubs during winter and can be removed by hand picking or pruning and destroyed. The collection of winter egg masses is one of the easiest control methods for the home grower. When young larvae start to form a tent, it may be pulled or cut from the branch and destroyed. Sometimes, if

the tent is located in the main crotch of the tree or on a large branch, it is not possible to remove the tent without harming the tree. Tearing the tent open in the early spring while it is still small exposes the larvae to the dangers of cold nights or rains.

Prevention

Usually, it is not necessary to spray large shade trees in the home garden. Large trees can tolerate considerable insect feeding without severe damage to the trees' vigor. If defoliation occurs in successive years, the tree may be weakened and control measures may be necessary to ensure survival. When spraying large trees, the work should be done by a licensed pest control operator or by a tree maintenance service. Young shade trees,

upt to seven meters high, may be effectively sprayed using a hose-end sprayer. When using any chemical insecticide, avoid inhalation of spray drift or contact with the skin or eyes.

If tent caterpillar numbers warrant spraying, apply one of the commonly available garden insecticides when larvae start feeding in May. Some chemicals registered for garden use include carbaryl, diazinon, endosulfan and methoxychlor.

Once a tree has been defoliated by extensive feeding injury, the tree may refoliate. New leaves can be produced from buds destined to produce foliage the following year or existing shoots may continue to produce foliage.

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