

“Tent Worms” on a feeding rampage

Rick Heflebower, Horticulture Agent

Tent Caterpillars have been at work, on various trees, throughout the county for the past several weeks. Their hatch has been delayed by a couple of weeks likely due to the cooler than normal spring temperatures we have experienced this year.

Eggs laid from the previous season (in a webbed tent) begin to hatch just as the new leaves begin to come out. Newly-hatched larvae feed voraciously on foliage and flowers. They tend to stay in clusters and often denude an entire branch before moving on. Once they have devoured the leaves of a tree, they will migrate to another in an effort to satisfy their appetite. These young larvae will molt (shed their skin) four times over a 4-6 week developmental period. They will then go into a resting stage for about a week, before emerging as a tan-colored moth. Adult moths mate, and the female will lay 100 to 350 eggs in a band on a limb. These eggs will not hatch until the next spring.

Control

In native cottonwoods, it is nearly impossible to control Tent Caterpillars. The nest is usually quite high in the tree and beyond the reach of even commercial equipment. The damage to large old trees is generally minimal unless the tree is stressed or not healthy. Defoliation of a large, healthy tree is not serious as there is generally enough reserve in the tree to put on new foliage again. If the nest can be reached before the insects mature, the branch can be sawed off and the insects destroyed. If limb removal is not practical, the nest can be torn open and an insecticide applied. Once they leave the nest, they tend to feed during the day and return to the nest in the late evening. The more serious problem occurs as the caterpillars leave the tree they have hatched from and begin to feed on neighboring landscape trees. If you begin to notice young caterpillars moving to landscape trees and shrubs, you can spray with a product containing “Bt” (*Bacillus thuringiensis*.) This “organic” insecticide is effective if used when the caterpillars are small, by stopping their progression from one stage to another. If they are approaching one and half to two inches, a more potent insecticide such as “Sevin” (Carbaryl) or a product containing Permethrin is required to do the job. There are a number of insecticides that are labeled to control insects in fruit orchards. Home Orchard sprays containing Sevin or Malathion will control them fairly well. Take care not to spray fruit trees during bloom as you run a higher risk of harming bees and other beneficial pollinators. Birds, bats and small mammals will feed on caterpillars and help keep natural populations in check, but they cannot control them enough to prevent landscape damage.

It is important to remember that Tent Caterpillars are more nuisance than anything. The damage to most landscapes is minimal. If your entire neighborhood is infested you should call a professional and let them locate the nest, preferably before hatch occurs!

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