

TENT MAKING CATERPILLARS

The season for tent building caterpillars is upon us and really only half way over. In the late winter we saw the emergence of the silver-spotted tiger moth caterpillar, Halisidota argentata. It spins its weblike nest in evergreen trees and feeds on the green needles of Douglas firs, true firs, and Sitka spruce. They have no sooner left the scene when the western tent caterpillar, Malacosoma californicum, has begun to hatch and build their ugly nests in deciduous trees, such as alders, and many kinds of fruit trees. Later in the season the fall web worm Hyphantria cunea, another tent building caterpillar will appear. It prefers shade trees and forest trees.

These three types of tent-making caterpillars are often mistaken for one another. However their appearance and habits are quite different. The adult of the fall web worm is a rather attractive white moth with yellow or orange rear abdomen. The caterpillar is yellowish brown with black and orange bumps and long tufts of whitish hair. It grows to 1 1/2 inches in length, completing its growth in the fall. It never leaves the tent to forage but rather expands the nest as more food is required. It overwinters as a pupa in a cocoon hidden in crevices in tree bark or in ground litter. The moth emerges in spring and lays its eggs in masses on leaves. It covers the egg masses with hair from its own body. There is often a second generation hatch of this species.

The silver-spotted tiger moth adult is a reddish brown moth with silvery white spots on its fore wings. The larvae are also 1-1/2 inches long and are covered with long brush-like brown and black hairs. The caterpillars hibernate in their webs during the winter. As the season changes they begin to feed vigorously. After they reach maturity they spin brown cocoons attaching them to debris on the forest floor. In early summer the moth emerges to lay her eggs.

The best known and probably the most damaging to home gardeners is the western tent caterpillar. The larvae hatch from light-colored egg cases that can be found encircling twigs of orchard trees - especially apples and cherries. When the orange and black caterpillars emerge they immediately begin to spin a tent to protect themselves from predators and to keep warm on cold spring nights. Unlike the fall web worm the tent caterpillar does not stay in its tent. As they begin to grow they forage for food outside the nest and only return to the tent at night. A heavy infestation of these caterpillars can defoliate trees; however, most healthy trees can survive this defoliation and can readily grow new leaves. Fortunately the infestations are cyclic and do not occur as heavy each year. When the caterpillar is mature it quits eating as it starts looking for a place to spin its cocoon and pupate into a beige moth with darker brown markings on the wings. Thankfully there is only one generation produced each year.

All of these caterpillars can be controlled by spraying with Bacillus thuringiensis or B.t., a relatively benign spray that kills only caterpillars and is safe for fish, birds, and warm-blooded animals and does not affect other insects. B.t. must be ingested by the larva for it to be effective; therefore, the spray must be applied early while the caterpillar is still eating. There are also other insects that parasitize some caterpillars by laying their eggs on its body. The parasite young feed on the caterpillar from inside which will eventually kill it. And then there is the old tried and true method of extermination that many people use to rid themselves of tent caterpillars. That is to simply cut off the branch tip where the nest appears and destroy it.

The information provided in this newsrelease is for education purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by Cooperative Extension is implied. Cooperative Extension programs and employment are available to all without discrimination.

This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.