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Tent Caterpillar

This time of year I get calls about many things so it is easy to come up with a topic to cover for this article. This week the topic is Tent Caterpillar. The question is, “what is the webbing in my tree caused from?”

Tent Caterpillar, *Malacosoma americanum*, is a common defoliator of trees in Missouri. Its preferred foliage is that of wild cherry although the insect will feed on plum, pear, cherry, crabapple, apple, hawthorn and maple. Occasional tents will be found on forest trees such as oak, ash, poplar, and birch. This caterpillar will spin a nest of webbing at the point of branch angle or point where branches join. In this way it is very different from the fall webworm which produces webs at the tips of branches.

The young caterpillars hatch at the same time of year as buds begin to swell on trees. When the caterpillars are small they will leave the protective tent during the day to feed and then return at night. The tent will eventually fill with dark pellets or frass as the caterpillar inside matures.

A mature caterpillar is dark in color and about 2 inches long. They usually have a white stripe down the center of the back with many short hairs on the body. Once mature it will leave the tent and spin a white cocoon. This cocoon can be found on the side of trees or in leaf debris, brush or nearby weeds. In late summer the female lays a band of eggs surrounding the smaller stems on trees. This band will be gray in color and look shiny. It surrounds the stem entirely. If these egg masses are noticed, remove them and burn the eggs to prevent the tent problem and defoliation of the tree.

To control this insect pest you can physically remove as many tents as can be reached by scraping the tent from the bark early in the morning or in the evening once caterpillars have returned to the tent. The same can be done on cloudy days when the caterpillars tend to stay inside the tent. Burn the tent once it is removed. Tents may also be removed by cutting them from the tree if the tent is found at the branch intersection of smaller stems. In this case remove the stem further toward the tree and then burn the tent once removed. Control should be done while the caterpillars are small. This means if you notice a tent now, control it now.

Spraying chemicals will not be effective if the tent barrier is not breached. Although the insects defoliate trees, they rarely do enough damage to kill trees. For these reasons spraying is not recommended unless the spray nozzle can penetrate the tent and the spray can be released inside the tent. Carbaryl and Bt are two chemicals that can be used but again, the spray must penetrate the tent if it is to be effective.

The Extension office is open Monday - Friday, located in Kennett, Missouri at 233 North Main Street. For horticulture questions contact the horticulture specialist at 573-686-8064. MU is an equal opportunity/ADA institution.