

Fall Webworms

You've probably noticed that webworms have been a lot worse this year than previous years. A lot of folks have been asking me why that is. I tell them it is because of the weather. That's the good thing about being an agronomist in Missouri. If you don't know why something happens, you can blame it on the weather and most people will believe you. Weather certainly was a factor this year, but there were also several other reasons why webworms were such a problem. All in all, it was just a bad year for webworms. We even had them in our soybeans.

Now, just to be clear, I'm talking about webworms and not bagworms. People sometimes get them confused. Bagworms create silken bags that hang down from the branch of a tree, usually an evergreen. Webworms create silken webs that enclose leaves and small branches, usually on a deciduous tree. They especially like hickory, walnut, ash, birch, oak, cherry, and crabapple trees.

There are two types of webworms: the red-headed webworm and the black-headed webworm. Both types of webworms emerge from the ground from late May through July and lay eggs on the undersides of leaves. The eggs hatch in about a week and the caterpillars begin to form webs over single leaves and feed on the leaves. As the caterpillars grow, they begin to web over more and more leaves until you notice those huge masses of webs in trees.

Although these webs can be unsightly and a tree can experience severe defoliation, damage is primarily aesthetic and death of the tree almost never occurs. Small nests can be pruned out of small to medium trees. Insecticides can be used but are less effective when the caterpillars are protected inside their webs. Webs should never be torched or burned while in the tree as this only causes more damage to the tree. It's a little too late to do much about webworms this year, but keep this information in mind starting about May next year. If you have questions about webworms, contact your local extension center or Travis Harper by phone (660)885-5556 or e-mail harpertw@missouri.edu.