

Insects



The Eastern Tent Caterpillar and Its Control

Frank A. Hale, professor

originally developed by Jaime Yanes, Jr., former assistant professor,

and Harry E. Williams, professor emeritus

Department of Entomology and Plant Pathology

Nests or tents of the eastern tent caterpillar are a part of the landscape along fence rows and in trees in many parts of Tennessee. This insect has become an increasing problem as more subdivisions spring up in rural areas.

Food Plants

The favorite host plant of the caterpillar are wild cherry and apple trees. It also feeds on peach, plum, pear, crabapple, rose, hawthorn and many different shade and forest trees.

Importance and Nature of Injury

In addition to making a tree look unsightly with the webs it constructs in the crotches of limbs, the caterpillars have big appetites and often completely eat all the leaves off a small tree. Aside from defoliating the trees, the caterpillars arouse much concern among area residents when they migrate in mass in search of new food or a place to complete their development. During periods of migration, caterpillars may be seen by the thousands over roads, driveways and sidewalks. It becomes virtually impossible to drive or walk in these areas without squashing them.

Life Cycle and Habits

There are four stages in the life span of this moth: egg, larva, pupa and adult. Eggs laid in July hatch

the following March. The colony of caterpillars stays together and spins threads of silk as they migrate up and down branches. Tent-building begins a couple of days after feeding. Groups of caterpillars from other egg masses often join together and build large tents in a nearby crotch.

The tents are enlarged as the caterpillars grow and are built several layers thick. The larvae leave the tents to feed several times a day but return to the tents when not feeding. The larvae become full-grown about six weeks after hatching and are nearly two inches long, black, sparsely hairy, with some white and blue markings on their sides. There is a white stripe down the middle of the back. At maturity, the larvae migrate down the tree trunks and form cocoons on the bark of trees, in grass and under nearly any object they can get under. The dirty white, oval-shaped cocoons can also be formed on trees or buildings. After about three weeks in the cocoon, adult moths begin emerging. The reddish-brown moth's emergence and flight usually takes place at night. This may account for the reason that the average person never sees the adults. Mating takes place soon after emergence. The eggs are laid in a foamy mass-like collar around the twigs. Each egg mass is shiny black and contains about 200 eggs. Eggs do not hatch until the following spring. Moths die soon after egg-laying. Only one generation occurs each year.

Control

NON-CHEMICAL CONTROL: Where trees are small and only a few are involved, the eastern tent caterpillar can be brought under control without the aid of insecticides if a person will apply any one of the following techniques:

1. Hand destruction of webs and larvae.
2. Pruning out webs and destroying them.
3. Destroying egg masses before spring.
4. Removing wild cherry trees.

Any one of these methods, if done thoroughly, will help reduce the tent caterpillars.

CHEMICAL CONTROL: The best time to control tent caterpillars is while they are small and before the leaves are half open on wild cherry trees. A good application of insecticide at this time can

completely eliminate the insect. Most people wait until tents appear in the trees before they attempt to apply control measures. You can find the recommended insecticide at the following link:

<https://tiny.utk.edu/ag/insectandmite>

Always refer to the insecticide label to make sure that the insecticide can be legally applied on ornamental plants at your site, such as residential landscape or commercial nursery.

Do not use Orthene on flowering crabapple as foliar injury may occur. Chlorpyrifos and diazinon are for use in commercial nurseries, not for residential use.

Disclaimer

This publication contains pesticide recommendations that are subject to change at any time. The recommendations in this publication are provided only as a guide. It is always the pesticide applicator's responsibility, by law, to read and follow all current label directions for the specific pesticide being used. The label always takes precedence over the recommendations found in this publication.

Use of trade or brand names in this publication is for clarity and information; it does not imply approval of the product to the exclusion of others that may be of similar, suitable composition, nor does it guarantee or warrant the standard of the product. The author(s), the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture and University of Tennessee Extension assume no liability resulting from the use of these recommendations.

THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE 
INSTITUTE of AGRICULTURE

ag.tennessee.edu

SP 341-N (Rev.) 4/14 14-0168

Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, and resource development.
University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture and county governments cooperating.
UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.