

HOT NEWS

EASTERN TENT CATERPILLAR A PROBLEM AGAIN IN 2010

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Flowering fruit trees in much of Indiana have been attacked by the Eastern tent caterpillar (ETC), *Malacosoma americanum*. This insect is one of the first insects out in the spring-time and sometimes hatches even before leaf buds break. These web-making insects are called tent caterpillars because they produce webs in the central crotches of trees.

ETC caterpillars are an early season pest, and normally begin feeding on leaves just as the leaves begin to break bud. The Eastern tent caterpillar is dark in color with a white stripe on its back, and it can grow up to 2" long.



Typical webs in tree crotches of a crabapple getting ready to bloom



Eastern tent caterpillar

This insect has some peculiar habits that make it relatively easy to control. They have only one generation of caterpillars each year that hatch from egg masses laid on twigs during the previous June.



Egg mass on twig

Caterpillars hatching from these eggs will crawl toward the center of the tree until they find a branch joint where they start to form webs. Caterpillars remain in webs during the day to avoid predation from birds. At night, caterpillars crawl from the mass of webs to feed on leaves.

If you can reach the webs, you can remove the caterpillars that spend their days inside them. Caterpillars can be killed by dropping them in a bucket of soapy water, or by simply squeezing them in your hands. Do not burn nests. While the snap, crackle, pop of burning caterpillars may be gratifying, burning nests will kill tree limbs.



Close-up of web in central crotches of a tree

When many nests are present, or too hard to reach, insecticide sprays can kill caterpillars and reduce defoliation. Two biological pesticides, Spinosad (Fertilome Borer, Bagworm, Leafminer and Tent Caterpillar Spray) and *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Dipel, Thuricide and others) can kill caterpillars. Both of these materials are easy on the beneficial insects and bees that keep other insects, like spider mites from becoming problems. Although acephate (Orthene), carbaryl (Sevin), and the pyrethroid insecticides such as, permethrin (Astro, Eight, Spectracide), cyfluthrin (Mavrik, Bayer Lawn and Garden), and deltamethrin, can kill caterpillars, they also kill beneficial insects that prevent mites and scales from becoming problems.

While Eastern tent caterpillar damage rarely, if ever, affects tree health, heavily infested trees can be completely defoliated. Also, after caterpillars finish their feeding, the presence of thousands of 2" caterpillars has given more than one homeowner a terrific fright. Moreover, like most other caterpillars, when they finish growing in May, they stop eating and begin to search around for a safe place where they can make their cocoons and transform into a night-flying moth. This can have the unfortunate result of turning your patio into a quivering mass of hairy caterpillars.



Complete defoliation

If you are are unlucky enough to have this wiggly extravaganza coincide with the annual family barbecue, you can use a hard stream of water to hose and wash the caterpillars into a heap that can be shoveled into a bucket of soapy water. To prevent the offensive odor associated with the decay of large numbers of caterpillars, homeowners should be sure to sweep up the dead insects and toss them into the compost or a trash bin.