TENT CATERPILLARS - ARE THEY SETTING UP CAMP IN YOUR YARD?

By Dennis Hinkamp

You’d think they’d have their fill by now, but many lawn and garden pests are just fatting up for the long winter ahead.

These insects damage plants this time of year, and can weaken them for years to come, warns Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist.

Tent caterpillars, for instance, feed on several varieties of trees or shrubs, but especially love ash, birch, oak, poplar and willow trees, he says. They usually only have one generation per year that peaks in mid-summer. Right now they are emerging as adults and getting ready to lay their eggs for next year.

Tent caterpillars get their name from the tent-like web they form around their colony as they feed in a tree or shrub, Goodspeed explains. The caterpillars are usually reddish-brown and fuzzy. After feeding for a while, they pupate and an ugly adult moth emerges, then deposits her eggs on the bark of unsuspecting trees. If not controlled this year, the infestation can be worse next year.

The organic control to apply on a regular basis is a product called Dipel or Thuricide, he says. Dursban, Diazinon and Sevin are chemicals registered for many of the affected trees. Because the caterpillars are in a web, complete coverage is necessary for adequate control. When using any chemical, be sure to read and follow all label instructions.

“A related pest that also enjoys camping in a tent is the fall webworm,” Goodspeed adds. “It is common in the canyons and can move into landscapes in the foothills and surrounding areas. They attack the same type of trees as the tent caterpillars and especially like native plants.”

Fall webworm larva are a pale, yellow-brown or gray, and not nearly as interesting as tent caterpillars, he says. Control can be achieved with the same sprays used for tent caterpillars.

The pear sawfly is another insect that causes damage in the late summer months, Goodspeed says. The larva is actually not a caterpillar, but the damage appears to be similar. Because the larval stage of the insect resembles a slug, it is sometimes called a pear or cherry slug.
“The pear sawfly attacks pears, cherries, plums, mountain ash and quince,” he says. “Normally, the sawfly only causes cosmetic damage, but if left untreated, it can defoliate a tree and cause severe damage to its health.

“The larva feed on the top surface, or epidermis of the leaf, usually between the veins. It creates a skeletonized appearance on the area where it feeds. This insect normally has two generations per year, one in the early summer, and another that starts feeding in late August and early September.”

The pear sawfly is actually quite easy to control, Goodspeed explains. A healthy tree tolerates a small amount of damage without any permanent harm to its health. There are also many natural enemies that eventually migrate to the area that like to snack on sawflies.

“Most insecticides control sawflies, but may not be required. An application of insecticidal soap on the foliage, completely covering the sawfly larva, should be enough to kill most of these feeding pests,” he says.

“Controlling insects now reduces their numbers next year, and possibly eliminates having to worry about them as much in the future,” Goodspeed says. “Of course, it might mean fewer cocoons for nine-year-old boys to stick in jars, but I think they can find other insects to torture.”

For more information, contact your local USU County Extension office.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 9 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert L. Gilliland, Vice-President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University, Logan, Utah. (EP/09/1999/DF)