

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 06-12-02) , ©2005

This is a bonanza year for tent caterpillars. What to do about this nuisance is the question of the day in the Extension Office. We've received numerous. The bad news is caterpillars are munching away prolifically and making a mess. The good news is they're almost ready to pupate and we won't have to see them until next year.

Caterpillars' favorite food is deciduous trees and shrubs, especially alder, willow, fruit trees and roses. (Now I know why they were all over my very thorny Rosa Rugosa.) Most healthy plants recover quickly from the infestation and grow new leaves. Plants and trees can lose about twenty percent of their foliage and still recover. Very healthy plants can be nearly denuded and still survive.

We have two kinds of tent caterpillars in Western Washington. Forest Caterpillar (*Melacosoma disstria*) is blue with black spatters and white, footprint-shaped markings. It does not actually form a tent but spins a silken mat on tree branches or trunks. The Western Tent Caterpillar (*Melacosoma californica*) is the culprit presently making such a mess. It has orange and black markings running the length of its body. Eggs hatch out in early spring (April or May) when new buds emerge.

The caterpillars leave their tent during the day to feed and return to the tent at night. They are less active during cooler weather. Caterpillars shed their skins four times during their five to six week growing period getting bigger with each shedding (molt). When they reach about two inches in length they become solitary and usually leave the tent.

At this stage they either return to the somewhat deserted tents or find crevices in logs and bark or find spots in folded leaves or in house sidings. Caterpillars form cocoons and begin pupation emerging as moths in about two weeks. The moths instantly mate, begin laying eggs and die within a few days. Females lay several hundred eggs in froth-covered bands around small twigs or branches on the host trees. Embryos develop into fully formed larvae but remain inside the eggs over the winter. In spring they'll hatch out and the cycle will begin again.

It's important to know that these caterpillars are natives to our area and are controlled by natural predators. Just as the weather evolves in seven to eight year cycles so do the caterpillars. If we can be patient and make it through this "bloom" of caterpillars we'll have six to seven years of light infestation.

If you just can't tolerate the damage you can prune out the tents and destroy them. Poled-tree-pruners work well for this task since the tents are usually on the upper tips of the trees. If you are outside the burn ban you can burn the pruned out tents and caterpillars (eek). Also look for the cocoons and froth-covered egg bands and destroy them. These materials can also be bagged and put in trashcans for disposal.

Another control is Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) applied as a spray. Bt is a live bacterium that acts as a stomach poison after the caterpillar eats it. It's important to apply Bt when the caterpillars are small because as they get larger they won't eat as much. Some literature says people with compromised or weakened immune systems should avoid being near Bt sprayed areas. Bt is toxic to all caterpillars (those of beneficial butterfly larvae too). If you choose Bt make sure you read and follow the label directions carefully to get maximum benefits. You'll need to make several applications. Remember too it is not necessary to treat nearby uninfested trees. Do not spray when it is windy or rainy either.

If you notice white egg-shaped spots on the caterpillars' backs you won't need to spray. These white eggs are those of the tachnid fly. When the eggs hatch the fly maggots burrow into the caterpillar and begin feeding. Viola – caterpillar death! This is free caterpillar control at its finest.

Most literature on tent caterpillars promises they'll be gone by July. Take comfort in that thought. And pray for an extremely cold winter to wipe out all those egg cases.

Send questions or comments to Peg at this newspaper or gardenmentor@yahoo.com