

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 05-28-03) , ©2005

We've received numerous calls about tent caterpillars in the last month through the Extension Office and many questions at the eleven WSU Master Gardener Clinics. Everyone thought 2002 was the worst year yet, but I think this year might surpass that entirely.

Try not to be overly concerned about the tent caterpillars. I know that's hard when they've covered your trees, walkways and even parts of your house siding. Keep reminding yourself that insect infestations peak like this over several years (hopefully only one more after this one) and then the populations reach such numbers that "Mother Nature" steps in and takes care of the situation without any help from us humans. Diseases, life cycles and predators bring populations into balance.

Tent caterpillars locally this year are munching away on: willows, roses (both wild and domestic), cotoneaster, apple and cherry trees, hazelnuts, alders and many other deciduous shrubs and trees. Most trees, unless they're diseased or dying already, will come back from being denuded by the caterpillars. A few trees may remain very skeletonized for the season, but most of the trees will leaf out again in mid summer after the caterpillars have moved on to cocoon.

If you have fruit trees and want fruit this year, the best method to control the tent caterpillars is *Bacillus thuringiensis* (B.t.). Bt is the preferred method of control if control is necessary. Bt is selective by killing only caterpillars and is relatively safe for other insects, fish, birds and warm-blooded animals. The bacteria must be eaten by the caterpillars though so it's important to spray it when they're actively feeding. That means shortly after they start eating the leaves. The leaves must be thoroughly covered with the product and Bt needs to be resprayed several times. Once ingested, the caterpillars take several days to die from the Bt.

There is a caveat. Bt can kill all caterpillars so any beneficial butterfly or moth larva will be killed too. Fortunately, most of the beneficial butterflies hatch later in the summer. Bt can be applied by a licensed pesticide applicator or by home gardeners. If you decide to attempt it yourself, make sure to read all label directions and follow the precautions, remembering to wear protective clothing. Bt can be a hazard to those with immune deficiencies.

If you want to get up close and personal with the squirming masses of caterpillars, look at their heads for a white spot. It's easy to see. If your caterpillars have white spots on their heads you won't have to do anything at all. There is a natural predator called the tachinid fly. The fly lays an egg on the caterpillar and the white spot is the egg mass. You'll love this – the eggs hatch and lots of maggots consume the caterpillars. Quite satisfying don't you think?

Some pesticide applicators are using pyrethrins which are technically organic. The chemical is derived from a chrysanthemum called pyrethrin daisy. It is lethal for bees and other pollinators and kills many other beneficial insects. You'll want to take that fact into consideration. Some lumber stores are recommending Sevin (a synthetic chemical) but WSU literature does not list this option in tent caterpillar control recommendations. Some literature you might find in books or on the Internet will recommend using Diazinon products. This chemical will no longer be available after December 31, 2004. Diazinon is hazardous to humans, other animals and to the environment and is not recommended by WSU.

To discover the toxicity and hazards of chemicals visit the following two websites. You can access the websites at your local library if you don't have Internet access or a computer at home. The Extension Toxicology Network is found at <http://ace.orst.edu/info/extoxnet>. The Washington State Toxics Coalition Website is www.watoxics.org. Both sites list a host of helpful and educational information.

Remember, too, you don't have to spray anything whether it be organic or synthetic based. You can cut off the tents if you can reach them. Burn the branches, twigs (and caterpillars) if you live outside the burn ban area; or bag up the clippings and caterpillars in a garbage bag and deposit in the trash. One of my gardener friends actually trimmed off all her caterpillar nests and put them in a trash bag, sent them to work with her husband on the Kingston-Edmonds Ferry and he put them in the dumpster at work. This friend will definitely remain anonymous.

I'll try to give some caterpillar and moth updates over the next few weeks. You might also want to visit <http://gardening.wsu.edu/library/inse003/inse003.htm> to read information about "Biology and Control of Tent Caterpillars."

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