

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 9-03-03 What's Up) , ©2005

How can school be in session already? Now that our summer is waning it's time to get out in our gardens and relax a bit. Mind you, my idea of relaxing is planting something; moving something to another location; or weeding and pruning.

While you're out there you'll probably panic momentarily when you see what looks to be the return of the tent caterpillars. Never fear, these pests aren't as numerous or destructive as the tent caterpillars. What you're witnessing is the fall webworm. These caterpillars appear as early as August and continue into September. The white moths you saw during June and July laid eggs on the undersides of leaves. Emerging caterpillars are yellowish brown with black and orange bumps and long whitish hairs. They build their web (tent) around the leaves and consume the leaves inside the tent. Tents can appear quite large. Our spring and summer tent caterpillars go foraging outside the tent and the fall webworms remain inside the tent, but the web becomes larger and larger as they feed.

You'll mostly find fall webworms on fruit trees, willow and cottonwood. Control involves removing and destroying the webs (if you don't have to cut off too much of your fruit tree in the process). Place the pruned out portion in a bucket of soapy water. After a few hours dispose of the nest in the garbage. If you are outside the burn ban area and are burning vegetative debris anyway you can burn the nests. During this very dry season we've had this is not a really good option. Keep a garden hose handy and buckets of water nearby if you choose this option.

If it turns out your orchards have a bad infestation of fall webworms you might have to resort to using Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*). This will only work if the webworms are newly hatching and feeding. You'll have to open up the webs to apply the Bt. Follow the label directions and wear protective clothing. Also cover the leaves outside the tent because the caterpillars enlarge the tent to the vegetation surrounding the tent.

Mary Robson, WSU Extension Agent in King County, says, "Often, trees will simply recover from an infestation of fall webworms and no chemical treatment is required. Prune them out if they can be reached. Removing the nest also helps reduce future infestations, because the insects overwinter in dark brown cocoons in the bark and in leaf litter on the ground under the tree. It's good practice to rake the ground under the affected tree thoroughly after leaf fall, discarding all the fallen leaves. Don't compost material with webworm cocoons in it."

You can order WSU Extension Publication EB0827 "Fall Webworm" from our Kitsap County Extension Office by calling 360-337-7157 or order online at <http://gardening.wsu.edu>. Copies are also available for purchase by visiting the Kitsap Extension Office at 715 Sidney between the hours of 9:30-11:30 and 12:30-4:30 Monday through Friday.

In researching today's topic I found a few other interesting sites to visit. Clark County Extension has a whole tutorial online about insects. Anyone can visit the site at www.pacifier.com/~cfthweb/bugs.pdf. The site has fifty pages of information with photos about common pests in our gardens and how to learn to live peaceably with them or in some cases how to control the damage they do. Least toxic and organic methods are well explained. Or visit www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/distr/lepd/moths/wa/toc.htm for a veritable encyclopedia of information about moths.

Let's talk briefly about the drought we've had all summer and then some. Hopefully, you've been watering your plants. Even drought tolerant plants will expire without water for three months. Help your plants survive by giving them a thorough drink of water once a week for the next four to six weeks. Trees and woody shrubs will especially appreciate a good drink. For example if the tree's drip line is 10 feet out then you'd also want to water five feet farther out than that. Avoid the area around the trunk. The idea is to water deeply into the ground rather than on the surface so the roots of the plants will receive water.

“Sunset Western Garden Book” edition published in 2001 (the one with the peachy pink roses on the cover) has a very user-friendly explanation of “water penetration” and “comparative root depths” on page 720 and 721. Visit your local branch of our Kitsap Regional Library or stop by your favorite bookstore and read this section to get a very good explanation of why and how to water your plants.