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Tent caterpillars can be controlled

Tent caterpillars are everywhere this year but the damage that they have done by feeding on the foliage of trees will generally not harm the trees.

This is the opinion of Keith Kennedy, extension entomologist at Michigan State University. "There is plenty of time for the trees to put out new leaves and continue storing up food for the winter," he adds.

Though tent caterpillars will feed on a wide variety of shade and fruit trees, their preferred hosts are wild cherry and apple. The female moths lay their eggs on these species in late July and early August.

The caterpillars typically hatch in mid-April, spin their distinctive tents in the crotches of the host tree, and crawl out to feed on the emerging leaves. If the caterpillars are out before the leaves, they will feed on the leaf buds.

The early warm temperatures this spring brought the caterpillars out earlier than usual, Kennedy observes. Without a cloak of foliage to conceal them, their tents have been highly visible, and concerned laymen have deluged foresters and entomologists with calls and requests for help and advice.

"Because their favorite food trees aren't of much economic value, tent caterpillars aren't usually considered a problem," says Kennedy. "They will get into valuable trees, however, if they deplete their original food supply."

Kennedy offers the following precautions to prevent damage:

If you can reach the tents, prune them out and destroy the worms. If tents are too numerous, you can spray.

The safest material for controlling these is *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a bacterial disease that affects only the worms. Though it does not kill them at once, it does stop their feeding within a few hours.

The chemical insecticides Sevin, Diazinon and malathion may also be used against tent caterpillars.

"Don't wait until the mature caterpillars — one and a half to two inches long, dark brown with black heads, a light stripe down the middle of the back, and black and blue spots on each body segment — are wandering down from the trees to find a place to spin their cocoons," Kennedy says. "Chemical and bacterial controls are much more effective on the caterpillars when they are small." □