

**Problem:** Eastern Tent Caterpillar - *Malacosoma americanum*



**Hosts:** Wild Cherry is a favorite but also attacks various ornamental shrubs, shade, and forest trees.

**Description:** As trees and shrubs such as flowering crab and sandhill plum begin leafing out in early spring, eastern tent caterpillar larvae hatch out from shiny black egg masses which encircle twigs. The eggs were deposited the previous spring when tent caterpillar moths were active -- the egg stage persists through the summer, fall and winter.

Eastern tent caterpillar larvae produce a small "silken tent" in the crotch of a branch. Larvae leave the tent to forage on newly emerging foliage but return to the tent when not feeding. The web mass increases in size as larvae increase in size. When mature larvae are about 2 inches long, black, sparsely hairy, with white and blue markings, including a white stripe down the middle of the back. After larvae have completed their feeding activities (generally by mid-May), some may remain in the tent where they spin a cocoon in which to pupate. However, most larvae will exit the tent, to spin cocoons under debris on the ground. [Cocoons are "caked" with a fine yellow powder which may cause a skin or breathing irritation if handled depending on an individual's sensitivity]. In two to four weeks, moths emerge, mate and deposit eggs for the next year's spring activities. There is but a single generation per year.

Tent caterpillars are more of a nuisance than detrimental to overall tree health and vigor. Depending on the size of the tree and the intensity of the tent caterpillar infestation, an infested tree may not "flush out" like an uninfested tree. Or a tree may take on a "ragged leaf" appearance. As web masses increase in size, they become unsightly. However, larvae complete their feeding at a time which coincides with vigorous leafing activity -- after trees put out a new flush of leaves within two to three weeks, the signs of damage disappear.

## **Recommendations:**

Tent caterpillars often go undetected until their tent becomes of sufficient size to be noticed. By this time, larvae will have essentially completed their development and so are best ignored. However, if a web mass is deemed objectionable, it may be easily removed by using your hands. If this is done at a time that the larvae are resting in the tent, they too can be eliminated. For people with an aversion to touching webs and larvae, a pole with a nail at its end, or toilet brush can be twirled -- the web mass and larvae will wrap around the pole or toilet brush.

If you wish to use an insecticide as a contact spray to control tent caterpillars, be sure that the end of the sprayer wand penetrates into the web mass -- this ensures that the webbing itself will not shield the larvae from the spray. If insecticides are to be used as a stomach poison, apply them as foliar spray treatments -- larvae will ingest the insecticide. Organic products *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Dipel, Thuricide) and spinosad (Conserve; Captain Jack's Dead Bug Brew; Monterey Garden Insect Spray, Natural Guard Spinosad) products **ONLY WORK WHEN INGESTED** and must be applied as a foliar spray! Products that work both as contact or stomach poisons include acephate (Orthene, Bonide Systemic Insect Control) and cyfluthrin (BioAdvanced Vegetable & Garden Insect Spray) will also work if sprayed directly on the insects.

## **References:**

1. [Web-Producing Caterpillars in Kansas](#), K-State Research and Extension Pub MF-2395
2. *Insects That Feed on Trees and Shrubs*, Cornell University Press, pg 142

**Last Update:** 1/11/2022

---

Brand names appearing in this publication are for product identification purposes only. No endorsement is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned.

*“Knowledge for Life”*

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service