

Tent Caterpillars 2006

Eastern Tent Caterpillars

Forest Tent Caterpillars

There are two distinctly different types of tent caterpillars affecting the North Country this year. The **eastern tent caterpillar** is seen every year in Clinton and Essex Counties and only feeds on apples, crabapples and cherry trees. The **forest tent caterpillar** is barely seen most years in our region but in the last few years it has caused severe damage to the forests of the western Adirondacks and Vermont, especially to sugar maples. As of May 2006 it has not been found in any significant number in Essex or Clinton counties.

Description

The **eastern tent caterpillar** is quite common in the North Country and is easy to find in May because of the conspicuous webby nests it builds in tree branches this time of year. These nests will only be found in apples, crabapples and cherries. Its obvious nests are easy to pull out with a stick so they are relatively easy to control. The caterpillar is easy to recognize once it gets over an inch long by the white stripe down the length of its dark back.

The **forest tent caterpillar** is, as its name implies, mostly a pest of the forest. It feeds on maples (especially sugar maples), oaks, ashes and many other forest trees. In bad years it moves onto landscape shade trees causing severe damage. They are easy to recognize by the single row of white dots down their backs that are shaped like footprints or snowshoe tracks and develop once the caterpillar is over an inch long. Forest tent caterpillars do not make an obvious webby nest like the eastern tent caterpillars but tend to hang from tree branches by silken threads when young, then crawl up and down the tree trunks when they get larger.

Damage

Both the eastern and forest tent caterpillars cause significant damage to their host trees by devouring the foliage at a rapid rate. They only feed until mid June so the trees have time to re-leaf but this is a strain on the plant. A tree can survive complete defoliation only a couple of years in a row. Drought or other stresses make survival even harder.

Life Cycle

Both types of tent caterpillars have similar life cycles. They overwinter as eggs laid in masses on tree branches. The caterpillars hatch in early May as the leaves unfold. The devour leaves and quickly grow, reaching 2" in length before pupating in late June - early July. At this point no further damage is done to trees for the rest of the season. Adult moths emerge in late July to mate, lay eggs and then die. There is one generation per year.

Control

Eastern tent caterpillars return each night to their webby nest when young and this nest is rather easy to pull from the trees. Forest tent caterpillars don't congregate like this so manual control is nearly impossible.

Both caterpillars can be sprayed with the organic pesticide Bt (short for Bacillus thuringiensis) sold as Dipel, Thuricide and Safer Brand Caterpillar Killer when extremely small. Once they are more than ¾" to 1" long this treatment is not as effective. Bt degrades within hours in the sun and must be eaten by the caterpillar. Infected caterpillars stop

feeding but take a couple of days to die. Other products include Sevin (containing carbaryl) and malathion. Check the label to make sure that your plant and this pest is listed.

Lake Friendly Gardening Tip – Think Before You Spray!

Eastern tent caterpillars can often be kept in check by pulling out their nest as soon as you see it. Be sure to squash the caterpillars in the nest. If you decide to spray Bt you need to get it on the youngest, smallest caterpillars. Once they are longer than 3/4” there is no point in using Bt.

Forest tent caterpillars are more of a large scale problem and haven't appeared in Essex or Clinton Counties in over 20 years. It's too soon to worry about them here but we are on the lookout for them.

Help us monitor

The eastern tent caterpillar is common in our area but we are very interested in tracking the forest tent caterpillar. If you suspect you have it, please bring a sample to any of our offices for a free identification. Enclose the caterpillar in a jar or container with a few leaves to keep it alive.



Eastern tent caterpillar on the left, forest tent caterpillar on the right



Only the eastern tent caterpillar makes a webby nest like this

PESTICIDE DISCLAIMER: Every effort has been made to provide correct, complete and up-to-date pesticide recommendations. Nevertheless, changes in pesticide regulations occur constantly, human errors are still possible. These recommendations are not a substitute for pesticide labeling. Please read the label before applying any pesticide and follow the directions exactly.

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