

Webs in the Trees

Published 8/17/20 – Picture of webworm webbing in an ash tree

For the last couple of weeks if not more, webbing has started to appear in trees and tall shrubs around town. If this was spring, these would be tent caterpillars. It's a little early but the fall web worms have appeared and those are what's making the webbing we're seeing.

The fall webworm adult is a somewhat attractive, at least as far as moths are concerned, white, hairy moth with some orange markings along their sides. They are native to North and Central America with a northern limit of about the 55th latitudinal degree. Accidental and perhaps planned, introductions from the 1940's onward have seen fall webworms now throughout Europe, North Korea, Japan, and China. The female moth lays greenish eggs on the undersides of leaves in the spring, the eggs number in the multiple hundreds. Once egg laying is done, the female dies before leaving the leaf. After 1-2 weeks the eggs hatch and the tiny larvae immediately start spinning their webs.



What is not attractive about these moths is the web spinning and the voracious appetite of the larvae. Also not attractive are the larvae themselves, and not because of the damage they do. Some caterpillar species are pretty, some not so. The fall webworm caterpillar is definitely not so. One to two weeks after being laid the eggs hatch and the tiny larvae immediately start spinning their webs. Leaf by leaf the webworm larvae can quickly skeletonize a surprisingly large area in a tree or tall shrub. Most preferred species of trees are chokecherry and walnut but they can also be found on cottonwood, maple, ash, and other hardwoods.

An infested tree usually has multiple web nests and in severe situations the entire canopy of a tree seems totally engulfed. A healthy tree can withstand this sort of defoliation even for several years in a row. Most infested trees shrug off the infestations and go about their business of growing without concerns. However several options exist for homeowners who find webworm nests on their property.

Contact insecticides such as permethrin or carbaryl, or the organic alternative Captain Jack's Dead Bug Brew, are effective at killing the larvae. Before spraying the nests it's a good idea to hit the nests with a hard spray of water that breaks apart the webbing allowing the contact insecticide to get directly on the webworm larvae. The areas around the nests should also be sprayed as that's the next area where the larvae will feed.

Another option is to cut out the foliage holding the webbing and either bagging and garbaging the webs, or my favorite, burning the webbing and accompanying cut foliage. Word of advice about cutting. If the infestation is large or covering a lot of the tree, too much cutting may do more harm to the plant than good so a better option might be the chemical treatment. More words of advice about cutting, and these are very, very important facts: while cutting, DO NOT stand directly under the webs and DO NOT stand there looking up with your mouth open.

I will not tell you how I know these facts.

Art Smith is a co-owner of East Pierre Landscape and Garden Center, 5400 SD Hwy 34, Pierre