

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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2004 seemed to be the year of the tent caterpillar, you saw them everywhere and some people think they are ugly. The season is coming upon us again for 2005. Fortunately they are mainly just an unsightly nuisance. They don't bite, are not poisonous and do not transmit diseases to humans or animals. Some birds eat them but most birds don't. These caterpillars prefer alder, ash, apple, birch, cherry, cottonwood, willow, fruit trees and roses. But when the infestation is heavy they can and will feed on many other plants.

First these squirmy little guys tend to concentrate on the leaves of a single branch but as they grow they divide into smaller groups and spread to other branches. That one tent can actually defoliate 20% of a small tree. The western tent caterpillar (*Malacosoma californicum pluviale* Dyar) is often the most numerous here in western Washington. Its markings are orange and black and it spins its tents on the tips of branches. The eggs hatch in early spring just as the new buds break open in April or May and the feeding begins. The larvae molt (shed their skins) four times during their growing period of about 6 weeks. About mid June they start looking for a protected spot in which to attach their cocoons, then they spin their cocoons and the adult moth emerges in about 7-10 days. These moths are light brown and stout-bodied. After the moths mate the female lays between 100 and 350 eggs in a froth-covered band around twigs or small branches of host trees. The eggs mature in three weeks but do not hatch out until the next spring.

Healthy trees and shrubs should be okay with even heavy defoliation but trees that have been under stress from excess cold or heat, drought or flooding can require more protection or you could lose them.

A good way to control tent caterpillars is to find and remove the egg case from the tree. They are usually a brown frothy material which has hardened to look like Styrofoam. Look for bands about ½ inch long on twigs. Once these caterpillars have hatched out the best and simplest way to control them is to prune out the branches they are on and dip them into a bucket of soapy water. Burning the nests is no longer recommended because of fire hazard.

The adult female caterpillar is attracted to light at night and may lay eggs on the buildings near these lights. To reduce this, use yellow light bulbs temporarily as outside lights during the flight period in July. You will find yellow lights attract far less night flying insects.

Also note that the best time to prune the tents out of your tree is early morning or evening, the caterpillars tend to be back in the tents at those times.

B.t. (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) is a good spray for the tent caterpillar. It doesn't harm bees, other insects, fish, birds, animals or humans. Only caterpillars. Remember to read and follow spray directions and realize that it takes a few days after application of B.t. for you to see results.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.