

Extension Notes

Personal Column for May 17, 2010

By Gary Hall, Iowa State University Regional Extension Education Director

Caterpillars Pitching Their Tents

While driving down the road recently, I noticed some unsightly growths on a number of trees. Upon closer inspection I found a number of caterpillars pitching their tents in the trees.

The eastern tent caterpillar has set up tent cities on apple trees, crabapples, wild plum, cherry and related trees. Some of these trees are hosting a large number of tent settlements. The characteristic silken tents are almost always constructed at the fork of a major branch on the tree or shrub.

Caterpillars emerge in late April and early May from eggs that were laid on small twigs last summer by the female moths. Females lay black egg sacks on twigs, near a leaf bud and the caterpillars eat the leaves as they grow.

Caterpillars are brownish with two yellow lines along their sides with blue spots in between them. A white stripe goes along the back.

During the daytime the caterpillars crawl out of their protective tent to feed on buds and foliage. On cloudy rainy days and at night the caterpillars remain in the protective confines of their tent. The tents start out very small but enlarge as the caterpillars feed and grow. As they add to their tent structure the pest becomes more obvious in your landscape and along the roadsides.

You can reduce the damage from these insects by removing and destroying tents and caterpillars as soon as they are noticed. The best time to remove the tents is early morning or late evening or on cool rainy days. You will be able to remove most if not all of the caterpillars as they enjoy the cozy, protective confines of their tents. It will be a false sense of security as you remove them from your tree or shrub.

The caterpillars and the silk webbing are harmless to people; no harm comes from taking down the tent with your bare hands, although I understand some people would rather do this operation with a pole or gloved hands. Foliage sprays of *Bacillus thuringiensis* can be used if necessary. This would be a great time to avoid using those messy sprays and enjoy great control by simply removing the caterpillar

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