

## Webworms

*R. Chris Williamson, Turf and Ornamental Specialist*

Several caterpillar species use silk to join plant leaves together to form nests. The nests are primarily used for protection.

Two of the most common caterpillars that create nests in fruit and woody ornamental trees are the eastern tent caterpillar and the fall webworm. These are not to be confused with the forest tent caterpillar, whose name is a misnomer because it doesn't make a tent. Both the eastern tent caterpillar and the forest tent caterpillar are often mistaken for gypsy moth larvae because of their similar appearance.

**Plants Attacked and Damage** Hosts of the eastern tent caterpillar, fall webworm, and forest tent caterpillar prefer are similar. However, the eastern tent caterpillar prefer plants in the rose family (Rosaceae) such as wild cherry, apple, crabapple, plum, peach, and cherry trees in landscapes. Eastern tent caterpillars have also been found in ash, birch, willow, maple, oak, and poplar.



Eastern tent caterpillar



Fall webworm (Photo by David J. Shetlar)

Forest tent caterpillars prefer wild cherry, but also feed on oaks, maples, hawthorns, and numerous other shade trees.

Fall webworms feed on almost all shade, fruit, and ornamental trees except conifers. The eastern tent caterpillar makes its nests in the spring when leaves are newly developing. These nests are typically in the fork of branches. Eastern tent caterpillars are generally active from April until early June; whereas fall webworms are active from July through September.



Unlike eastern tent caterpillars, fall webworms typically make their nest in branch tips. Because forest tent caterpillars do not make nests, their feeding begins as gregarious defoliators in the upper portion of trees where they feed on expanding flowers, leaf buds, and eventually foliage.

**Control** Rarely do pest populations of the eastern tent caterpillar, fall webworm, or forest tent caterpillar reach large populations in ornamental trees. Generally trees can recover from the feeding damage. However, nest and feeding damage can lower the aesthetic value of a plant. On small trees, the nest can be simply removed or pruned-out. Simply scrape or prune the nest off onto the ground and crush or destroy the caterpillars. Early morning or late afternoon is best because many of the caterpillars are located in the tent. In larger trees, insecticide treatments may be necessary, however it is important to treat young or small caterpillars while they are inside the nest in the morning or late afternoon. Repeated, year after year, defoliation by webworms may contribute or play a role in tree decline.

**For pesticide recommendations:** See UW-Extension Bulletin A3597 or contact your County Extension Agent.