

Fall Webworms

As the end of summer looms, one of the most noticeable insects hits its stride. These insects are not as eye-catching as the home that they build for themselves. The fall webworm will be webbing the ends of branches soon. Fall webworms web many species of trees or shrubs. These include oak, birch, linden, ash, apple, lilac, hickory, fruit and nut trees, like walnuts and elms, and some maples as regular targets. It is unusual to see fall webworms in the same tree year after year and especially on the same branch. They are “one and done” feeders.

This insect could easily be grouped in the “much ado about nothing” category. A big, showy bag of webbing appears over the end of a branch. Inside, the hungry fall webworms are devouring all the leaves. It is highly visible and leaves are being consumed. This has caused tree-owners around the state to try risky and sometimes dangerous methods to get rid of the webbing. Branches have been set on fire or cut off, and pesticides have been sprayed that have rained down on the sprayer to stop this perceived pest threat. This is a case of the human doing much more damage to the tree than the fall webworms ever could. This native insect has more than 50 natural predators and 36 parasites that help control it. Best of all, fall webworms do not eat the buds of next year’s leaves. They are feeding on leaves that are nearing the end of their photosynthesis careers and only have a bit more to give. Next year, the leaves will appear on the currently affected branches with no sign of last year’s damage.

Eggs are laid by the female moth on the bottoms of leaves about a month or so before the larvae or caterpillars hatch. The caterpillars construct a web over the end of the branch, enclosing leaves. They feed inside the web, enlarging it as they feed. Their lives as larvae are usually about six weeks, but long after they have left, the webs remain. If the web is white, it is new. If it is tan or brown, there are no larvae there. Webs can last into the winter before falling out of the tree during a wet snow or a windstorm.

Since fall webworms construct such good webbing, pesticides that are sprayed are worthless and just repel off. It would be necessary to tear a hole in the webbing to access the inside. If you are close enough for this, the trusty stick is a safer solution. Smart gardeners always use the path of least pesticides used, especially if it is not necessary.

Consider fall webworms as a showy display to herald summer’s passing. A big, white filmy bag on the end of branches should not bother the smart gardener.

Ref: MSU Extension Website, the Rise and Fall of the Fall Webworm

The **Master Gardener Hotline** is open from April to October, Monday through Friday. Lines are available 9:00 am to noon and 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm at 888-678-3464

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