

Ask Dr. Fill

Dear Dr. Fill

When I'm driving out in the country at this time of year, I often see masses of what looks like thick spider webs on the tips of branches that seem to have black insects inside. Sometimes there will be a strip of trees a mile long that all have these webs in them. I'm wondering what this is, and if there's any risk of those insects causing this damage to the trees in my yard. If they do show up, is there anything I can do to save my trees. Also, do they only attack certain kinds of trees, or do they build those webs on any tree they find?

**Thank you.
Grossed Out by Bugs**

Dear Grossed Out By Bugs:

It happens like clockwork every year. Your late-summer garden is looking great and then all of a sudden you see big, horrible webs in your trees and shrubs. Inside these webs are colonies of caterpillars munching away at your trees' leaves. And yes, they are gross!

Many people confuse these fall webworms with tent caterpillars. The Eastern Tent Caterpillar shows up in our area in the early spring, and they build their "tents" in the forks of tree branches. Webworms, on the other hand, build their nests at the tips of branches. Webworms are the caterpillar form of a small white moth. The moths fly around during the summer laying their eggs on the underside of tree

leaves. The moths seem to prefer alder, willow, apple, pear, elm, oak, and maples, but will eat a very large variety of trees and shrubs. In fact, they are considered at the top of the list for "insects that eat the most types of trees." As the eggs hatch, the caterpillars start to spin a web around the leaves they're on. They feed for about six weeks and their webs can become quite large – covering an entire branch or, even an entire tree sapling. This is when they look their worst. So what is a gardener to do?

Before panicking, the first thing you should know is that these webworms don't typically cause a lot of damage to trees and shrubs. They look far worse than they are. So if you don't mind them, the most organic approach is to simply let them be. Even if they defoliate your entire tree (which they won't do), it's usually late enough in the season that it won't seriously harm your tree, as the leaves were already preparing to go dormant and drop from the tree. The caterpillars do provide food for a number of birds, spiders, and wasps.

However, there is no doubt that these nests are nasty looking, so many gardeners want to remove the webs. In small trees, the most effective solution can be to physically remove the webbing with a shovel, rake, or even a big stick. If you just break the nests open, chances are their predators will come in and devour the insects that were inside. In larger trees, you can also prune out the affected branches

and destroy them. Even if you can't completely remove the nests, don't worry. Simply damaging them and opening up a hole is enough to allow birds or beneficial insects to get rid of the pests for you.

It may also help if you can encourage beneficial insects. Several species of insects, including a number of tiny wasps, attack and kill webworms for you. Encourage the beneficial insects which will devour webworms by planting sunflowers or other plants in the daisy family in your yard, and avoid using pesticides which kill these wasps. (These parasitic wasps are NOT the ones that sting people and ruin your picnics).

If you want to spray them to kill them, it's important to use the right product. A bacterium called Bt infects and kills many species of caterpillars, including fall webworms. A natural caterpillar disease, Bt won't cause damage to plants, people, or pets. Bt is only effective if you can break a hole in the webbing to spray the disease onto the pests. It is available at most nurseries. It is worth noting that while Bt harms ONLY caterpillars and is therefore considered a fairly "friendly" method of pest control, it does affect the caterpillars of many butterflies, so know what type of caterpillar you are spraying. Luckily, with fall webworms, there is little doubt as to what they are. No one would ever confuse webworms with the caterpillars of a Monarch butterfly!

You can also try spraying with Neem. Some report that it's quite effective – others find that it's not as good as everyone says. While neem is organic, it will kill many beneficial insects, so again, spray with care, and it must be sprayed directly into an opening in the webs they have built. No pesticide will be effective if the waterproof webbing isn't broken open so the spray makes contact with the insects. The good news is that even heavy infestations likely won't kill your trees.

You can also help to prevent a fall infestation in the spring if you spray any of your trees they might be tempted to visit with a lime-sulfur and dormant oil spray. The fall webworm will winter as a pupa in a flimsy light-colored cocoon. These cocoons can be found in protected little cracks in the bark of your trees. The dormant oil can smother them so they won't open.

Hope this information helps. If you do spot a web starting on the end of a branch on a tree in your yard, get a VERY long stick (yes, they ARE gross) and poke a hole in the web to allow birds to get at them. This should deal with the problem before they build a really large, unsightly nest.

Thanks for the question!
Dr. Fill