



EASTERN TENT CATERPILLAR

During the spring, the eastern tent caterpillar, *Malacosoma americanum*, makes its annual visit. Late last summer, adult moths of this species deposited egg masses in trees such as cherry, apple, and crabapple. While these trees are preferred hosts, tent caterpillars can also feed on ash, birch, oak, poplar, black gum, red gum, maple, willow, witch hazel, hawthorn, peach, and plum.

The insects over-winter in these egg masses and begin to hatch in early spring. Young caterpillars gather in forks of the branches and build a web that shelters them when they are not feeding.

As each caterpillar moves to and from the web, it leaves behind a strand of silk that will enlarge and expand the protective tent structure.

In most cases, damage caused by this insect is cosmetic.

However, in some cases with high populations or with new plantings, damage can be severe.



When larvae are mature, they leave the host tree and begin to wander in search of a location to pupate. It is during this wandering stage that we notice large numbers of caterpillars on patios, lawn furniture, and the sides of buildings. Wandering stage tent caterpillars no longer feed and will cause no further damage to host trees.

A strong water spray with a hose is an effective way to remove these insects.

After the caterpillar has located a protected site, it spins a white cocoon. In late June or early July, adult moths that are pale, reddish-brown with two lighter stripes running diagonally across the forewing will emerge from these cocoons, and the cycle will begin anew.



In many cases, removal of the tent is the most effective way to control this insect. Once it is removed from a tree, destroy the tent to insure the caterpillars do not relocate to a different tree. If treated early, biological insecticides such as Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis var kurstaki*) can be used. Later in the season, insecticides such as carbaryl (Sevin®) or malathion are recommended. Use extreme care when using pesticides—read and follow all label directions.

As the season progresses, insecticides will become less effective in controlling this insect.

Horse owners should take special notice of eastern tent caterpillars. Pregnant mares that accidentally eat wandering caterpillars often spontaneously abort their foals. This is called "mare reproductive loss syndrome" or MRLS and is now suspected or confirmed in several eastern states. If you keep horses and have any of the insect's preferred trees near your paddocks or pastures, inspect the trees and remove and destroy tent caterpillars—especially if your brood mares are expecting.



Photo by Lynette Schimming
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