

Fall Webworms

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As I've been riding around Stewart and Webster Counties, I've noticed a whole lot of webs hanging from the limbs of lots of trees. While you may think of them as bags containing bagworms, that's actually a different insect with a completely different looking home. What we're seeing in the trees now are actually fall webworms (I know, real creative, right?). I'm going to share a little bit about these fuzzy caterpillars.

Fall webworms occur throughout the United States and even into southern Canada. They feed on the leaves of mostly hardwood trees and spin grayish silk webs around the leaves in the process. The caterpillars may have different coloring on their bodies and especially the heads; some have reddish heads, while others have black heads. They all have clumps of hair on their bodies and can be about 1 inch long when full grown.

While many species of forest, shade, ornamental, and fruit trees are hosts of fall webworms, the most common host trees are pecan, oaks, persimmon, sweetgum, and other ornamental trees. Outbreaks can completely defoliate host trees, but healthy hardwoods can usually survive and recover without permanent injury, even though it looks horrible. However, if the leaves are defoliated for several years in a row, your tree can be weakened and may die.

Fall webworms (Credit – G. Keith Douce, UGA, bugwood.org)



Fall webworms nest (Credit – James B. Hanson, USDA Forest Service, bugwood.org)

One of the easiest things to do may be to do nothing. Most of these infestations are occurring on deciduous trees, meaning they lose their leaves every year. If the number of fall webworms is not too high, you may just want to wait until the leaves fall off, and the caterpillar stage of life will end after a few weeks. If these are defoliating leaves on an evergreen tree or are defoliating an entire limb's worth of leaves, then you need to be aware of how many caterpillars are munching on your trees and consider various control methods listed below.

Fall webworms have lots of natural predators, or beneficials. These can include birds and certain predaceous and parasitic insects, like assassin bugs and parasitic wasps. Some chemicals may control these caterpillars, but you need to break up the webbing before treatment. This may be difficult to do

30 feet up in a pecan tree, but it's critical to get the insecticide on the fall webworms for it to work. You can treat infested plants when bags are first noticed with a product containing acephate (Orthene), carbaryl (Sevin), or *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Dipel).

These caterpillars also have an odd habit you can use to amuse yourself. Tap branches near the web. When disturbed, all of the caterpillars in a nest will make a distinctive "jerk" in perfect rhythm. They will even respond to a loud noise, such as a hand clap or shout! Think of the hours of fun.

If you have questions about this subject or other agricultural topics, please give me a call at the Webster County Extension Office at 229-828-2325 or your local County Extension Office.