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Have Your Trees' Leaves Been Devoured Overnight?

If your tree hasn't been attacked, then you've most likely heard someone talking about how their tree lost most if not all of its leaves overnight. The insect responsible for this damage is the Eastern Tent Caterpillar.

Populations of the Eastern Tent Caterpillar fluctuate each year. When the conditions are right, without warning huge numbers of worms begin eating our trees' leaves. Just as you probably don't remember seeing this pest before, you most likely will not even notice this pest in your landscape next year.

Its web, built in the crotches of limbs, is usually the first sign of the caterpillar in the landscape in the spring each year. You can practically identify wild cherry trees in fence rows by sighting the webs in the limb crotches. According to Dr. Frank Hale, UT Extension Entomologist, the caterpillar also feeds on apple, peach, plum, pear, crabapple, rose, hawthorn and many different shade and forest trees. You may even see thousands of these caterpillars crossing the road or driveway as they search for a place to complete their development. They will eventually move from the web and form cocoons where they will stay before turning into moths. They will then fly briefly and lay eggs in July which will hatch the following spring.

Hale says the caterpillars have a large appetite and can defoliate an entire small tree in just a few hours. Many homeowners are alarmed when they notice that all is left of their tree is limbs without any leaves. There is no need to be concerned. The tree will replace the leaves since it is so early in the year.

In most cases, control is usually not necessary. For those special circumstances such as small trees or valuable specimen trees, you may consider either non-chemical or chemical control measures.

Non-chemical control would include destruction of the webs and larvae, pruning out webs, destroying egg masses, and removing wild cherry trees. Hale points out that chemical control will be most effective when applied when the caterpillars are small, usually when the leaves are less than half open. Most people wait until they see the web before they attempt chemical control. Call your local Extension office for a list of chemical control options.