



## CATERPILLARS ARE EXPECTED TO RETURN

Several caterpillars have been serious springtime pests throughout Columbia County the past few years. They include the Eastern and Forest Tent Caterpillars and Pine Sawfly. The Eastern Tent Caterpillar (ETC) is known for the conspicuous web nest that it builds primarily in the crotches of various trees and shrubs, in our yards, hedgerows, and along roadways. Flowering crab apples are one of their favorite food sources.

ETCs are dark colored, hairy caterpillars with pale blue dots and yellowish white strip down its back. These caterpillars can generally be found crawling nearly everywhere, coming down from their web nests in various trees. They feed on the foliage of assorted ornamentals such as apple, wild cherry, crabapple as well as various deciduous forest trees, although they seldom cause enough damage to warrant much active control. We do not recommend burning out the nests since the flame can cause more damage to the trees than the caterpillars. However, a forceful stream of cold water from the garden hose will dislodge a lot of those caterpillars and nests which will reduce the damage they do. While these caterpillars are pretty evident throughout the county now, they are usually gone a few weeks after they appear. The tent caterpillar is only a springtime insect and its webs are in the crotches of trees whereas the fall webworm is seen in the late summer, early fall and the webs they make are usually at the tips of branches of forest trees. They are two entirely different insects, but neither causes much damage.

The adult of ETC is a relatively nondescript brown moth with white markings on its wings. It becomes noticeable after the caterpillars cease feeding, pupate, and eventually develop into the adult moth. In late summer, early fall, the adult will mate and lay egg masses on the twigs of the trees it was previously feeding on. These egg masses are quite conspicuous if you know what you are looking for. In fact, fruit growers and many gardeners are on the look out for these egg masses all winter which they will prune off. The egg mass looks like a brownish, cylindrical formation wrapped around the twig looking like a varnished piece of styrofoam. It is firm and shiny and can be up to an inch long.

A very close relative of the Eastern Tent Caterpillar is the Forest Tent Caterpillar(FTC). However, the FTC is a more serious pest of forest trees in much of New York State. Serious outbreaks over the past few years have occurred in northwestern NYS, the Catskills, and we even had two outbreaks in Columbia County last year - Greenport and New Lebanon. The FTC has also proven to be a pest for school and park ground's departments where the heaviest outbreaks occur in trees and shrubs near outside lighting. It appears that is where the adult FTC moths were attracted for food out of the forests in July. The FTC does NOT form a tent similar to the ETC, but rather constructs a silken mat on the trunk or branches of the host trees. And unlike the ETC, the Forest Tent Caterpillar has a series of white keyhole-shaped spots down the middle of its back. As mentioned above, this is a much more serious pest and may deserve some dedicated management efforts by the homeowner or commercial tree care business. As the caterpillars grow in size, their feeding slows as they begin the process to pupate. This will mark the end of their feeding cycle which generally occurs from late May through early June. Fortunately they only have one generation a year so their damage will cease then. Many otherwise healthy trees that are nearly defoliated by the Eastern and/or Forest Tent Caterpillars will attempt to put out another batch of foliage this year. While that will make the trees look better, it does rob from the food reserves of the tree which may create problems in future years. However, there is nothing one can do to prevent that, although proper fertilization of those trees this fall, might be desirable. Cornell Cooperative Extension has a fact sheet on proper tree fertilization. Since sugar maples are also a very popular food source of the FTC, those tapping trees may consider holding off tapping following a severe defoliation or reduce the number of taps per tree.

The other common caterpillar that shows up each spring throughout Columbia County is the Pine Sawfly. The

larvae stage of this sawfly, is a dark green worm with a dark or black head. They are commonly found feeding on the needles of pine trees such as Scotch and mugho. While their feeding can be quite severe in a very short period of time, they do not cause the damage to their host plants that the tent caterpillars do. Their feeding is generally limited to last year's needles and can be found in clusters of dozens of the caterpillars towards the end of the branches of host trees. Like the tent caterpillars, streams of cold water from the garden house does a good job of dislodging the feeding caterpillars from the trees. There are also some insecticides such as the biological *Bacillus thuringiensis* products that can be quite effective on the young stages of these caterpillars. Make sure the pest you want to manage and the host plant are on the label and be sure to read and follow all directions.