



FALL WEBWORMS

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The webs that your are noticing on the tips of branches on various trees as your drive around the county are caused by the fall webworm, *Hyphantria cunea*. This is a relatively common insect for much of the Hudson Valley and while we see it each year, some year's their damage is worse than others. However, they really cause very little injury to trees so it is not a pest we need worry about.

The fall webworm, the caterpillar stage of a satiny-white moth, is responsible for this unsightly webbing that shows up in the late summer/early fall. It should not be confused with the web tents made by the tent caterpillars that are often prevalent in the spring time. Those web tents show up in the crotches of various trees, while the webs of the fall webworm caterpillar occur at the tips of branches, often wrapping several inches or up to 2 to 3 feet of branch in webbing.

The fall webworm is known to occur throughout much of the U.S. They feed on the leaves of over 100 kinds of fruit, ornamental, and woodland trees. However, the exposed sides of roadside and hedge-row trees are most commonly attacked, while trees in the forest are seldom attacked. The webworm caterpillars confine their feeding to the leaves that they have covered with webbing and usually not much of the tree is affected, generally only a few branches at most. Because the defoliation is late in the season and only on a few branches, the impact on the tree is minimal. The presence of the unsightly webs in the trees throughout the fall and into the winter months is more often a greater concern than the defoliation itself.

The adult moths of the fall webworm emerge from their wintering stage in May and June and lay clusters of 200 to 500 eggs on the leaf surfaces of host trees. The eggs are partly covered with white hairs or scales and are usually laid on leaves near the ends of branches. Depending on the weather, tiny caterpillars hatch from the eggs in one to two weeks. The caterpillars immediately begin to weave their webbing over the leaves at the end of branches. Their web is small at first, but become larger as the caterpillars devour the leaves within the web and continue to extend the web to cover more leaves. Feeding is done entirely under the protection of the web and generally only tender portions of the leaves are eaten, thus leaving skeletons of leaves. As the caterpillars grow, their web becomes filled with dead leaves, cast skins, and caterpillar feces. Smaller trees may even become completely enveloped in their web.

The caterpillars vary in color from pale yellow to greenish, with a broad, dusky stripe down its back and yellowish strip on each side, and clothed with long, white hairs. The caterpillars are gregarious until the last instar, when some of them may wander from the web. When they have reached their full length of about 1 inch, they crawl down the tree to spin a cocoon and pupate under ground litter. The insect remains in the pupal stage until the following spring when the moths emerge and the cycle begins all over again. While in the southern states there is often two generations of the fall webworm each year, we here in the north only see one generation. Knowing what this pest is and that it causes little or no injury to your trees, should help make you a Happy Gardener!

More questions on your trees and shrubs can be addressed to the Master Gardener volunteers of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Columbia County, 479 Route 66, Hudson, NY 12534 by phone at 518-828-3346 or via email at columbia@cornell.edu. ###