

RESEARCH LABORATORY TECHNICAL REPORT



Cankerworms

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Cankerworm caterpillars are common defoliators of shade trees in late spring. Two species of cankerworms are landscape pests: Fall Cankerworm (*Alsophila pometaria*) is found in eastern North America and as far west as Montana. Spring Cankerworm (*Paleacrita vernata*) is found over most of North America, including Texas and California.

Damage

Cankerworms feed on the leaves of many different hardwood trees including oaks, elms, apples, cherries, hickories, maples, ashes, beeches and lindens. In addition, large caterpillars often spin down on silk threads from large trees and feed on understory plantings such as dogwood flowers, rose buds and other landscape ornamentals. Outbreaks around homes are an annoying nuisance, with droppings (frass) and caterpillars on cars, picnic tables, and house siding.

Damage by cankerworms happens quickly in the spring as the caterpillars eat the expanding new leaves (Figure 1). One year of cankerworm defoliation is not

Figure 1: Cankerworm feeding leaves only the mid-veins of foliage



permanently damaging to healthy shade trees, however, two or more years of defoliation greatly increases tree stress, which can leave the tree more susceptible to other stressors including borer damage, disease, branch dieback, root decline or death.

Life Cycle

Cankerworms have only one generation each year. Fall cankerworms emerge as adults after the first hard freeze in October through December. Spring

Figure 2: Fall cankerworm caterpillar



cankerworms emerge as adults during warm spells in February or March. The wingless females of both species crawl up on tree trunks to lay eggs. The eggs of both species hatch in early spring, about the time that saucer magnolia blossom and eastern redbud is

Figure 3: Fall cankerworm caterpillar



beginning to bloom. In fact, the tiny caterpillars often begin feeding by tunneling into unopened buds (Figures 2 and 3).

Management

Regular landscape inspections should be implemented to monitor for outbreaks. Since most eggs hatch high in trees in early spring, the first signs of an outbreak are easily missed. Tree protection can be achieved with injections, spray treatments and tree banding (Figure 4), which can deter adult moths from ascending into the canopy of the tree to lay eggs. Regular fertilization, watering and mulching can help trees recover from cankerworm outbreaks. Please contact your Bartlett Arborist Representative for effective control options.

Figure 4: Tree banding reduces eggs laid in trees and provides an early method on monitoring populations



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