

## Forest Tent Caterpillar

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The forest tent caterpillar, *Malacosoma disstria*, is a native pest to North America and is found throughout the United States and Canada, from coast to coast. This caterpillar is mainly considered a forest pest but will cause defoliation on deciduous species in the landscape.

### Appearance and Life Cycle

The forest tent caterpillar is black when it first hatches and gradually develops distinct coloration during the course of five instars. The larvae generally appear as leaves begin to expand in early spring. The older larvae are easily identified by their blue coloration with white, 'key-hole' shaped spots along their backs (Figure 1). Forest tent caterpillars do not actually produce tents, but may spin a nest of fine threads against the trunk of a tree where the larvae congregate at night. Pupation occurs over a 7-10 day period in a cocoon that consists of one or more leaves folded and held together by silk threads. Egg masses are fairly conspicuous black bands of up to 350 eggs, laid on small twigs. There is one generation per year.

**Figure 1: Key-hole spots with blue coloration are distinguishing traits of forest tent caterpillars**



### Damage

Damage begins with open feeding in the spring as leaves expand. The most common hosts are in the genera *Populus*, *Salix*, *Alnus*, *Betula*, *Prunus*, and *Quercus*, although many broad-leaved deciduous plants may be fed upon. Tattered appearance of leaves followed by heavy defoliation is a symptom of heavy infestations. In natural situations, heavy infestations can last 3-6 years before natural parasitoids regain control over population levels. The most common damage from infestations is a reduction in growth with some branch kill. Trees will normally replace foliage with a second flush, but repeated defoliation can weaken the tree and lead to secondary disease and insect issues.

### Control

Partial control can be achieved using cultural methods. Removal of egg masses in the winter is a good way to reduce damaging populations in the spring. The egg masses can be removed any time after they are laid, but are most conspicuous when there is no foliage in the winter. Fertilization based on soil analysis will help defoliated trees to replace damaged or lost tissue. Please contact your Bartlett Arborist Representative for more information on effective control options for this pest.

