

Late Season Caterpillar Defoliators

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Chewing insect pests may be present throughout the year, but the timing of pest attack and extent of the infestation will influence the severity of damage. By fall, many trees are preparing for dormancy, and the loss of leaves for photosynthesis has a lesser impact at that time compared to the beginning of the growing season when energy demands are high. While management of early season caterpillars that defoliate is critical for preserving foliage for the growing season, the benefits of management later in the year rarely outweigh the costs.

Common Pests

Several caterpillar species are common late season defoliators, including orangestriped oakworm (*Anisota senatoria*) (Figure 1), yellownecked caterpillar (*Datana ministra*) (Figure 2), and fall webworm (*Hyphantria cunea*). These species feed around the end of summer and beginning of fall.

Activities of caterpillar defoliators become more apparent as fall nears. Webworms produce large silken webs at the ends of branches (Figure 3). Other species exhibit bright coloration and gregarious social behaviors. Skeletonization damage of leaves worsens as caterpillars grow and consume more plant tissue.

Figure 1: Orangestriped oakworm (*Anisota senatoria*)



Figure 2: Yellownecked caterpillar (*Datana ministra*)



Damage

The impact of damage caused by late season chewing pests is often minimal as most of the energy from photosynthesis has been stored and natural senescence is occurring or will occur soon. If the foliage was damaged early in the season, energy loss to the tree could be considerable.

Occasional loss of foliage is seldom a significant concern for the health of deciduous plants; however, the severity and timing of defoliation are important considerations in management decisions. More concerning is repeated loss of much of the foliage,

Figure 3: Fall webworm (*Hyphantria cunea*) nest at a branch terminal



which can cause energy deficits and lead to tree decline symptoms. Unlike deciduous trees, the loss of foliage on evergreen plants is more damaging because the functional lifespan of their leaves extends over multiple seasons. Healthy evergreens shed only the oldest leaves annually, so loss of new foliage greatly impedes energy production and can rapidly lead to symptoms of branch dieback and decline.

Management

Management of late season defoliators is rarely warranted, and natural enemies of these caterpillars can often provide effective suppression. In cases of severe infestation, evergreen plant damage, or when the infested tree has experienced previous defoliation or severe abiotic stress events, control efforts may be considered. Using selective products can help to preserve beneficial natural enemies. Also, providing good cultural care will help the plant to recover and tolerate future stress factors. Please contact your Bartlett Arborist Representative to learn about management strategies.



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