

## **The Fall Webworm**

**by Lloyd Eighme, retired entomologist**

Many of our insect pests were imported from other countries, but this one is a native of North America. In fact, it hitched a ride to Europe and Asia and is an important pest of trees there now also. It is not picky in its food habits and feeds on whatever broad-leaf trees it can find, but does not eat conifers. In our area it seems to prefer black walnut, willow and cottonwood, but causes more concern when it attacks fruit trees.

The messy, web nests of these caterpillars, usually at the tip of a branch, look much like the tent caterpillar nests. The fall webworms enclose their feeding area with webbing and do not go outside of it, but the tent caterpillars use their tent only for protection at night and during stormy weather, going outside of the tent to feed. When the fall webworms eat up all of the leaves in their tent, they then enlarge the tent to enclose more leaves. If you disturb their tent, they start making jerky movements all in unison in an attempt to frighten away the enemy. These caterpillars are pale, with a dark longitudinal stripe and long whitish hairs arising from knotty projections along the body, giving an overall fuzzy appearance.

The fall webworm may have more than one generation during the summer in warmer climates. The web tents are never very large, usually less than 12 inches long. All of the green leaves inside the tent are eaten up and when the caterpillars are mature, they crawl out of the tent, drop to the ground where they spin a cocoon in which to spend the winter as a pupa. After the tree sheds its leaves in the fall, the ugly web tents are more obvious and can be seen at the ends of branches into the winter. Maybe that is why it is called the fall webworm.

The adult moth emerges from its winter cocoon in the spring, after the leaves are on the trees. It lives only long enough to mate and lay eggs in a suitable host tree. The moths have white wings and at first glance they might be mistaken for the adult of the yellow woolly bear. The webworm moths are smaller, with a wing span of less than 1 1/2 inches. Some of those farther south have black marks on the wings. They have some orange color on the front legs and face, but not as much as the yellow woolly bear moth and none of the orange and black spots on the body. Is it important to be able to distinguish between these moths that look so similar? Yes, because the fall webworm feeds on trees and the yellow woolly bear feeds on weeds and garden plants. If you see fall webworm moths flying to your porch light at night, do not spray your garden, they will only lay their eggs on trees with leaves. The simplest way to control fall webworm on your backyard fruit trees is to cut off and destroy the web tents as soon as you see them. That may be all you need to do. If you see the tents on the trees in the fall

after the leaves have dropped, it is too late. You will have to deal with this pest next spring. Read more about the fall webworm in EB 0827



The Fall Webworm Moth