

WSU Extension Puget Sound Forest Stewardship

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Tent Caterpillar Outbreaks

We are seeing lots of activity by the western tent caterpillar this year, especially in the islands (Whidbey and San Juans). I want to assure everyone that while their activity may be unsightly and a little disconcerting, it is completely normal. These are native insects that are a natural part of our forests. We do not recommend spraying chemicals for this. Mechanical control (e.g. removing and disposing of branches with tents) or tolerance (i.e. waiting it out) are the best courses of action.

Here is some great information on the subject from WA DNR entomologist Karen Ripley:

“Western Tent Caterpillar is a native insect that has 3-year population outbreaks on (about) a 9-year cycle. We’ve been watching for them this year, especially since it’s been about 8-9 years since the last outbreak on Whidbey Island (which was JUST like this, maybe worse) and we saw abundant tents on parts of San Juan Island last summer. These tent caterpillars feed on the foliage of red alder, cottonwood, fruit trees and many other broadleaf trees and shrubs. They hatch from an egg mass in approximately May, when the new foliage is emerging. Initially they shelter in a silken “tent,” leaving it to feed and returning to shelter during times of adverse weather and at night. The tents are usually the most conspicuous sign that an outbreak is present – the dark mass is highly visible and persists in the branches even after the caterpillars have finished feeding and matured enough to pupate and metamorphose into moths (which then, in about August, mate and lay eggs for next year’s batch of caterpillars). The caterpillars themselves can be a nuisance, they make your trees look crummy (temporarily) and are kind of gross with droppings, stench, and creepy-crawly-ness. The caterpillars will stop feeding and disappear for the year soon. The trees will produce a new crop of foliage soon. It’s extremely rare that significant damage occurs and that’s generally only during times of severe drought (which is not present now). As for the nuisance – yep. You own your property to enjoy it, but spraying pesticides won’t help make your property a healthy place to enjoy or change the tent caterpillar trajectory significantly either. You can do other things such as kill (squish) caterpillars you can reach. Search (later) for egg masses to destroy by hand. And you can watch for signs of parasitic flies and wasps and viruses that will be encouraging to you because it is these creatures that will kill large numbers of the caterpillars and bring this outbreak down in the end. It does take about 3 years for an outbreak to run its course. This is part of living in the Pacific Northwest. It will pass, and return, and pass again.

Here is some more great information from WSU Extension entomologist Sharon Collman:

“Western tent caterpillar has a beneficial role in nature in that defoliated trees may become more efficient in their physiological processes and compensate by producing more leaves. Defoliation also allows light and water to reach the forest floor so the understory plants benefit. At the same time all the digested leafy material rains down as thousands of little caterpillar poops. When water moistens them, the microbes can feast, returning nutrients back to the plant. A wonderful circular system. The most common parasitoid of western tent caterpillar is a tachinid fly. She lays a white egg on the body (most often around the head area) of the caterpillars. The maggots feed on non-essential organs then the major organs last. Tolerance is fine for us who are tolerant, but many people find caterpillars just too creepy to live with. In peak years, roads become slick with their wandering bodies creating traffic hazards; one man said his wife left and wouldn’t come back until the caterpillars were gone; in Seattle during a peak year the 911 lines were clogged with caterpillar calls, preventing answering real emergencies. Quick fixes include pruning out tents where practical. The usual garden pesticides will kill the caterpillars but leave an unsightly batch of cadavers hanging on the silken pads and the tents still remain. A better solution when caterpillars are bivouacked low on the trunk is to reach up and work the fingers under the silken pad and slowly pull it down (the caterpillars will hang on), and wrapping it hand over hand until silk and caterpillars are all pulled off, place it in a paper bag, freeze it and toss it in the compost. DO NOT use torches to flame them. Handmade torches of string and rags, burn through the string and the rag unravels and has caused roof, dry grass fires and burned people severely. The flame isn’t so good on the tree either.”