

Webby Messes in the Tree Branches

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

At this time of year it isn't uncommon to find large masses of what looks like spider webs at the ends of branches in the trees. They may start out fairly small and rather unassuming, but as time goes on you notice that they are growing bigger and bigger. Upon closer inspection you realize that inside all that webbing there are a lot of caterpillars and not very many leaves. Which is usually followed by a state of panic as you fear something is killing your tree.

Relax! It's going to be okay! What you are witnessing is the annual occurrence of the fall webworm. The fall webworm adult is a pretty little white moth that you may see under yard lights in the evening, but are more likely to just overlook. The larval form is the caterpillar that you are now seeing in the trees. Because the caterpillars create a big bag of webbing some people mistakenly call these bagworms, but bagworms are what feed on cedars or junipers earlier in the summer.

Fall webworms produce two generations a year. The first brood, in the spring, is fairly small and easily overlooked. Trees are growing rapidly branches and leaves are growing and the feeding usually goes un-noticed. The second generation starts to get fired up in July and will be present through the end of this month.

An adult lays masses of eggs (up to 500) on the undersides of leaves. The small caterpillars feed in colonies and start to construct the webbing. The webbing encloses a bunch of leaves and the webbing serves as protection from predators while the caterpillars feed safely inside. As the caterpillars grow their appetites and the amount of leaves enclosed in the web continue to grow. Once they finish feeding the caterpillars will crawl down to the base of the tree and overwinter as a pupa in the leaf litter under the tree.

Webworms tend to be more attracted to trees that are out in the open, not surrounded by other trees. There tend to be higher populations in eastern and southern parts of the state. While they certainly have a preference for walnuts and pecans, they will feed on many different species of trees. There is another caterpillar that feeds on walnuts, the walnut caterpillar, that doesn't make the webby masses on the ends of the branches, but does tend to congregate on the trunks.

The defoliation by the webworms doesn't really cause any damage to the tree and will not kill it. If you are trying to produce walnuts or pecans, the webworms will reduce the harvest and decrease nut meat size so control would be beneficial. But for general ornamental trees, the best approach is to do nothing.

For effective insecticide control the webs must be broken up and removed so that the spray gets to the caterpillars. If controls are applied when the webs are still small you can have pretty good success. By the time the webbing gets fairly good sized, as in mid September, control is going to be difficult at best. While the webbing tends to stick around in the trees into next growing season, I wouldn't worry about it. The trees already have all the food reserves stored up in the roots so losing leaves doesn't hurt the tree.

Over the years people have tried several different approaches to deal with these webworms. They have cut off ends of branches behind the webbing and then burned them. They have used blow torches and different forms of flaming to burn the webs and the caterpillars in the tree. All of these control efforts, while potentially fun, do more damage to the tree than the caterpillars will ever do!