

NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

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Spongy Moth Destructive to Trees

Spongy moth caterpillars have hatched in northern Wisconsin and are in the process of feeding on trees, often leading to defoliation. Last year saw extremely high numbers of this pest in our region, resulting in another large crop of caterpillars this year.

Formerly known as gypsy moth, spongy moth first arrived in New England from overseas in 1869 and has spread westward ever since. This invasive insect pest has become one of the most important insect pests of forest and shade trees throughout the eastern part of the country, including Wisconsin. Caterpillars defoliating trees, especially in consecutive years, weakens trees and makes them much more susceptible to other insect pests and diseases. Many tree species are affected.

Caterpillars feeding now emerged from egg cases deposited by female moths last summer. Female moths are white and cannot fly, releasing pheromones to attract the brown male moth, which can fly. A buff-colored egg mass is laid in summer and lasts until the following spring. Egg masses appear on trees, buildings, picnic tables, fenceposts, and other structures.

Larva, which are hairy caterpillars, hatch out and feed during the day when small. As they develop, they feed at night, typically descending to seek shelter during the day.

Caterpillars start out small and dark but as they grow develop distinctive blue and red bumps running down their backs. Larva can suspend on a single thread but do not make visible webs in trees. Tent caterpillars, another early season pest, have made the conspicuous white webs currently visible in area trees. Once done feeding, larva will pupate and adult moths emerge in July, mate, lay eggs, and die. Adult moths do not feed.

There are several methods for homeowners to manage spongy moths. Caterpillars feeding on smaller trees can be controlled with insecticides such as *Bacillus thuringiensis kurstaki*, a bacterial insecticide specific to caterpillars. Larger caterpillars moving down tree trunks may be trapped with a burlap band or skirt hung around the trunk with twine. Check these daily and knock caterpillars into soapy water to kill them. Sticky bands on tree trunks can capture small caterpillars.

With the significant rainfall we have had this spring, conditions are favorable for a fungal pathogen called *Entomophaga maimaiga* to develop and help reduce spongy moth caterpillar populations.

The other key management tool is destroying egg masses during the dormant season. Egg masses can be scrapped off surfaces with a putty knife or treated with dormant horticultural oil. For more information on spongy moth, go to the UW Extension Horticulture website at www.hort.extension.wisc.edu.

Interested in learning more about
Horticulture in Iron County?
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