

Why worry with fall webworms?

Have you noticed trees along roadsides with leaves and branches encased in silken webbing? This is caused by fall webworms.

Even though they are commonly called fall webworms, they can occur earlier in the year. They are normally observed during late summer and fall when people notice the unsightly whitish or light gray webs. Webworms enclose leaves and the ends of branches with silken webbing that they make. The worms (caterpillars) are found in this protective webbing consuming leaves. Although they can defoliate branches on which they are feeding, very little to no permanent damage is done to the tree. It is more of an aesthetic problem.

The caterpillars are covered with whitish hairs. The adult is a moth. They overwinter as pupae in the soil or leaf litter. There are three to four generations per year.

This native insect of North America is known to feed on over 85 tree species in the United States. But in the Southeastern US, including North Florida, they are more commonly found on pecan, hickory, common persimmon, sweet gum, black walnut and bald cypress.

What they are eating (tree leaves) is a temporary part of the plant. The leaves on host trees emerge in spring, grow through summer and then fall away in mid fall or early winter. They are not feeding on or damaging in anyway a permanent part of the plant.

Webworms feed on trees in nature, along roadsides, in wooded areas and in pecan orchards and landscapes. If you were to somehow tag or label some of the trees infested with webworms and then visit these trees come spring, you'd find new leaves with no damage.

Some people prune out infested branches or limbs, permanently removing nice tree limbs and branches. Left alone, these branches and limbs would still be a part of the tree, eventually producing new leaves. Some people attempt to burn the webbing, with caterpillars inside, possibly damaging healthy branches, trigs and buds from heat. These "control" efforts can do more damage than webworms could ever do to the tree.

Many natural predators and parasites help control webworms, including birds, predatory stinkbugs and parasitic wasps. Insecticides may negatively interfere with these natural predators and parasites. Plus, it can be difficult and dangerous to apply insecticides overhead. And, the webbing is difficult to penetrate with water or sprays.

In my opinion, it's best to let these caterpillars run their course. Besides, they cause no permanent damage for your tree.

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