

Prevalent Leaf-Eating Bugs Unsightly, But Pose Little Threat to Trees

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County foresters and forest health specialists are reporting that three varieties of leaf-eating caterpillars are now being seen in many parts of the Granite State: eastern tent caterpillars, forest tent caterpillars and gypsy moths. While these bugs are responsible for defoliating trees and the eastern tent caterpillars create unsightly webs, for the most part they are nothing to worry about.

“The eastern tent caterpillar is common this year and doing some damage to cherry and other fruit trees,” says Kyle Lombard, forest health specialist at the New Hampshire Division of Forests and Lands. “It rarely kills the tree and it’s not really a forest pest of consequence.”

Dode Gladders, UNH Cooperative Extension’s Sullivan County forester, said he has seen more eastern tent caterpillars this year than last year and there are a few reports of forest tent caterpillars. Other colleagues have reported seeing both pests in the southern counties, primarily Rockingham, Hillsborough, Merrimack and Sullivan counties.

Forest health specialists at the New Hampshire Division of Forests and Lands are receiving reports of high numbers of forest tent caterpillars and gypsy moths but haven’t heard of any defoliation by these pests. Each of these pests has several predators that help keep their populations in check. “We fully expect rain in the next few weeks to activate the well-established biocontrols and no major defoliation should occur,” says Lombard.

“Trees have adapted to occasional defoliation and other stresses,” says Gladders. “No doubt, trees do better without being stripped of their leaves, but they are amazingly resilient and healthy trees recover as long as they aren’t defoliated yearly.”



Here are details on what to look for, what to worry about and what not to worry about:

[Eastern tent caterpillars](#) are the most visible. They weave webs, mostly in cherry trees, stripping the tree bare. They are more of a nuisance than a threat to trees, rarely killing healthy trees. They have nearly completed feeding and will soon pupate, emerging as moths in July. Defoliated trees will produce new leaves once the feeding stops.

[Forest tent caterpillars](#) are the “tent caterpillars” that don’t make tent-like nests. They are active now. They feed on hardwoods including oak and sugar maple. Like their relative the eastern tent caterpillar, they don’t cause irreparable harm to healthy trees.

[Gypsy moths](#) are also starting to feed. Because this pest caused extreme defoliation in the 1980s and 1990s, this caterpillar gets blamed for most of the work of the other two. However, a fungus introduced in the early part of the last century is preventing gypsy moth numbers from exploding and it is unlikely they will defoliate as extensively as in the past.

Populations of insects rise and fall with natural controls that keep them in check. Insect parasites, predators, viruses, fungus, weather extremes and even starvation when populations exceed the food supply all help control them. There is little we can do to prevent them from attacking, though there are some effective treatments for specimen trees. For more information on appropriate treatments, call [UNH Cooperative Extension's Education Center](#)'s toll-free information line at 877-398-4769.