

Forest Health Extension Notes



Fall Webworm - The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Hyphantria cunea



The Fall Webworm is a native pest found throughout North America. Host species include more than 85 species of deciduous forest, shade, and fruit trees with preferences varying from region to region. In Norfolk County, Fall Webworm tend to favour Black Walnut, White Birch and ornamental fruit bearing trees.

Description

In late summer or early fall, unsightly grey webs can be observed on trees. Fall webworms will usually construct their nest over the end of a branch and the caterpillars will remain in the webbing and encase new foliage as their food source runs out. The nests contain the caterpillars, partially eaten leaves, and fecal droppings, and can extend 2 to 3 feet (60-90 cm) along a branch.



Fig. 1 Fall webworm nest.¹

Life Cycle

The caterpillars are covered in long white hairs, and can have black heads with pale greenish to yellow bodies, or they may have reddish-orange heads with tan bodies. Fall webworm overwinters as a pupa in a cocoon found in the soil or ground litter. Adults emerge as white moths from late May into July. Females will lay their eggs on

the underside of leaves and the caterpillars hatch out in about 7 days.



Fig. 2 Female moth laying eggs.² Fig. 3 Newly-hatched larvae.³

The newly-hatched larvae begin to web over single leaves and as they grow in size, they consume more leaves and their nest increases in size as well. The larvae mature in about 6 weeks, at which time they drop to the ground and pupate.



Fig. 4 Fall webworm larvae skeletonising a leaf.⁴



Fig. 5 Fall webworm nest.⁵

Damage

Though the large, ugly webs detract from the beauty of shade and ornamental trees in an urban setting, the damage to the tree is insignificant. Since the caterpillars make their nests in the late summer or early fall, the host tree has had ample time to use its leaves for photosynthesis. The caterpillars eat the leaves that will drop to the ground in a few more weeks with the arrival of Fall.



Fig. 6 & 7 Examples of fall webworm nests.^{6,7}

Control

There are several options for managing fall webworm:

- ◆ Tear open the nests with a pole. This allows predators including wasps, and songbirds access to enter the nest and feed on the caterpillars. Orioles can often be seen snacking on fall webworms. This is the most recommended form of management, as it is of no cost to the homeowner, and allows natural predators to control the pest.
- ◆ Prune nests out of small to medium-sized yard trees, then burn the prunings or soak in a soapy water solution. Do not burn the webs on the tree, as you can damage the tree or injure yourself. When burning, remember you must abide by Norfolk County's Burning By-Law.
- ◆ Spraying pesticides is not recommended as it is difficult for the pesticide to penetrate the nest and effectively kill the caterpillars.



Fig. 8 Fall webworm nests.⁸

If you have any questions or concerns regarding fall webworm or any other forest health issue, please call:
Norfolk County's Forest Health Hotline
 519-426-5999 ext. 2607



Fig. 9 Fall webworm larva.⁹

References

- Hoover, Gregory A. (2001). Fall Webworm *Hyphantria cunea* Drury. *Entomological Notes—Penn State Department of Entomology*, 1-2.
- D. J. Shetlar. Fall Webworm Management, HYG-2026-95. *Ohio State Univ. Ext. Factsheet - Entomology. Ohio State Univ. Columbus OH.*

Photo Sources:

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