

Safe Yard Product Buying Guide Pest Solution Fact Sheet

Tent Caterpillars



Western tent caterpillar, *Malacosoma californicum*, is the most common tent caterpillar in the Puget Sound area. Trees in the rose family, such as crabapple, apple, and cherry, are the primary hosts. They make large tents in spring on the end of branches, chewing leaves and defoliating branches. Tent caterpillar populations follow cycles of unknown duration. They can remain a problem for a number of years, and then decline to very low levels. Most trees can tolerate a 25% defoliation. Some can withstand 100%, and bounce back the same year. Several tents in a single mature tree should not be a problem for the tree.

Chickadee, nuthatch, junco, and bushtit all eat tent caterpillars. Other predators include ground beetles, tachinid fly, and braconid wasps.

The caterpillars feed during the day, and return to their tent at night. They feed for 5 or 6 weeks before they pupate. The adult moths mate, lay eggs, and die. The eggs do not hatch until the following spring. Control measures are best directed at the adult prior to egg laying. Once the webs are first noticed, the gardener has about 5 weeks to take action.

The following products can help control tent caterpillars without risking the health of your family, pets, or environment.

Product/type	How to use
Physical	
Prune Out Webs	Use a pole pruner to reach the webs. Prune in early morning or evening, when caterpillars are in the web. Place the web and individual caterpillars in a bucket of soapy water to kill them.
Traps	Place squares of plywood on the ground and check under them daily before nightfall. Use a piece of plywood about 2 feet by 2 feet in size. Drop the caterpillars into a bucket of soapy water.
Chemical	
Spinosad	Break open the web with a stick, and spray the caterpillars
Biological	
Bacillus thuringiensis, (BT)	Spray on affected foliage only. The caterpillars must eat the leaf for it to work on them.

As with all pesticides, protect people, pets, and the environment by following all instructions and cautions on labels.



Grow Smart, Grow Safe®

Learn about the hazards associated with specific pesticide products at GrowSmartGrowSafe.org.

Disclaimer: List does not include all products carried by store. Product ratings are based on Grow Smart, Grow Safe®. Responsibility for misrepresentation of any product as a result of customization will rest solely with the creator of the altered content. See www.growsmartgrowsafe.org for disclaimer and copyright information.

Try These Products

- Bonide Captain Jack's Deadbug Brew
- Safer Brand Caterpillar Killer with BT

Tips for pesticide application

Many pesticides pose a risk to people, pets, and the environment. Use the following guidelines to minimize these risks.

- Do not overuse. Apply according to directions.
- Time strategies appropriately for the larvae or adults, as needed

Puget Sound
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Pest control that's safer
for your kids, pets, and
the environment!

Tent Caterpillars

Preventing Tent Caterpillars—your best defense!

Know your Insect	<i>Malacosoma californicum</i> , western tent caterpillar, form their tents in the spring. The fall webworm also spin cocoons and may be confused with tent caterpillars. Most western tent caterpillars have a pale blue head capsule and body, speckled with black markings, and a stripe along their backs, with white-tipped hair covering their bodies.
Look for their Egg Cases	Egg masses, visible on bare twigs in winter, or defoliated twigs in spring, are hardened frothy material about an inch in length, encircling a twig. They resemble styrofoam. The color can vary from pale to dark gray or brown. Egg cases can be stripped from the branches by hand, or pruned out.
Monitor plants in Spring, and Prune out Tents	Monitor your plants in spring for signs of tent caterpillars. If you can reach them, prune out the tents in the early morning or evening, when the caterpillars are resting inside. Drop the tents in a bucket of soapy water to kill the caterpillars.
Encourage Natural Predators	Birds, predaceous beetles and bugs, and parasitic wasps and flies all feed on tent caterpillar. Put up birdbaths, bird houses and allow undisturbed areas with no pesticides, nor pet access.



Western Tent Caterpillar Egg Mass. Photo: Robin Rosetta, Oregon State University



Western Tent Caterpillar larvae

How pesticides work

Spinosad: Spinosad is a natural substance made by a soil bacterium. Spinosad affects the nervous system of insects that eat or touch it, leading to paralysis and death, typically within 1-2 days. Spinosad will kill any caterpillar that eats it, so only spray it on plants affected by the tent caterpillar, not broadcast widely. It has low toxicity to mammals, but high toxicity to bees, until the spray has dried on the leaves. So spray in the evening hours when bees are less likely to be out.

Bacillus thuringiensis, BT: BT makes toxins that target insect larvae when eaten. In their gut, the toxins are activated. The insects die within a few hours or weeks. In contrast, when people eat the same toxins, the toxins are not activated and no harm occurs. Each type of BT toxin is highly specific to the target insect. For example, the ‘kurstaki’ type targets caterpillars.

Other Pesticides

Other pesticides that are commonly used to treat caterpillars include permethrin, lambda-cyhalothrin, bifenthrin, malathion, and carbaryl, which can be harmful to bees, salmon and/or people. Ingredients in many common insecticides can pose a significant threat to people, pets, and the environment. Understand the risks by visiting Grow Smart, Grow Safe®: www.GrowSmartGrowSafe.org

What to consider when using pesticides

Pesticides can also harm beneficial insects that prey on tent caterpillars. Be sure to choose a product and method for tent caterpillars that will not cause harm to people, pets, pollinators or other wildlife. Spray in spring after overwintering eggs hatch, at about the time leaves are 0.75 to 1 inch long. Control is much more effective if sprays are applied when larvae are small.

This Fact Sheet was customized by Garden Green, October, 2017.

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Support for the customization of this Fact Sheet was provided by the Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment