

Now is the time to protect against cankerworm

Cankerworm season is here, and there is no need for alarm. In most cases no action is necessary, but if your trees have been stressed, you may consider banding them for protection.

There are two species of cankerworm; the fall cankerworm (*Alsophila pometaria*) and the spring cankerworm (*Paleacrita vernata*). Both of these moths are native to North America and are in the geometer or inch-worm family, Geometridae. They are also very polyphagous, which means they have wide host ranges, including oak, elm, apple, and beech, among many others. In both species the female is completely wingless and must climb up the tree to lay their eggs. The fall cankerworm lays eggs in November and December, and the spring cankerworm does so in spring. The eggs of both species hatch at bud break and begin to feed on the tender, young foliage, leaving just the veins of the leaves.

Because the females have to crawl up the trunk to lay eggs applying a band of sticky substance, such as Tanglefoot™, can completely control infestations on that tree. Banding, as this practice is called, is used by many homeowners and by some cities to keep populations at low levels.

Charlotte/Mecklenburg County in North Carolina has had increasing populations of cankerworms, despite aerial pesticide applications. Because the defoliation occurs almost every year many urban trees are weakened and made susceptible to other pests and diseases. These dying urban trees often drop limbs and can cause property damage or injury in urban environments. The caterpillars can become so abundant that they cause allergic reactions in some people. As such, Charlotte has implemented a banding program. The city identifies especially susceptible trees, particularly older, weaker willow oaks, and applies bands to these trees in November and December to keep the female cankerworms from crawling up the tree.

Trees are more resilient than given credit for. Most trees can withstand complete defoliation if they are healthy and if the defoliation is not repeated soon. In these cases preventative action does not need to be taken.

Trees that have been exposed to drought or other stress will likely decline after a defoliation episode and need to be protected. If you noticed a large outbreak last spring now (November and December) is the time to act. You can band the tree by wrapping a cotton cloth around the trunk of the tree. This cotton cloth should be at least three feet above the ground and below any limbs. The cloth can be attached with electrical tape. Place a strip of roofer's felt over the cloth and attach it with a staple gun on larger trees or electrical tape on smaller trees. Using a rubber glove or a spatula apply a thick layer of Tanglefoot™ to the roofer's felt.



The female fall cankerworm is wingless and must climb up tree trunks to lay her eggs. Photo credit: James B. Hanson, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org.



Most of these eggs of a fall cankerworm have hatched. Photo credit: Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Forestry Archive, Bugwood.org.



This caterpillar of the fall cankerworm feeds on foliage. Photo credit: E. Bradford Walker, Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, Bugwood.org.



Cankerworms have caused defoliation in this tree. Photo credit: USDA-Forest Service, Ogden Archives, Bugwood.org.



These trees have been banded to prevent cankerworm infestations. Photo credit: Keith Douce, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org.