

Fall Webworm

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The fall webworm, *Hyphantria cunea* (Drury), is a common caterpillar pest of trees. It attacks more than 88 different kinds of plants, including many fruit, nut and ornamental trees and shrubs. It does not attack conifers (pines and other needle-bearing trees).

Fall webworms are known for the large, unsightly webs they produce. Heavy infestations are rarely fatal, but if they occur repeatedly over several years they can stress trees and make them more susceptible to drought, disease or other insect pests.

The feeding preferences of fall webworms vary from one place to another. In west Texas, mulberry, poplar and willow are preferred; oak, hickory and pecan are most often attacked in east Texas.

Description

The fall webworm moth is white and has a wing span of 1 to 1 1/2 inches. Sometimes there are small, dark spots on the forewings. Full-grown larvae are approximately 1 inch long, pale green or yellow, and covered with tufts of long, white and black hairs. There are two distinct races of the fall webworm, which can only be identified during the larval stage. Larvae in the orange race have orange heads and orange tubercles, while members of the black race have black heads and tubercles.

Fall webworms often cover entire branches with their webs. In extreme infestations whole trees may be covered. Larvae feed within the web, eating the tender parts of leaves, while avoiding the larger veins and midrib.

Biology

Fall webworms have two to four generations each year in Texas. Four generations occur in southern portions of the state, while two to three generations occur in the northern areas. The first generation occurs as early as April in south Texas and as late as June around Lubbock and Amarillo. The last generation of the year, which occurs in the fall, is usually the most damaging and gives the insect its name.

Fall webworms overwinter as pupae on the ground or on rough tree bark. The moths emerge from silken cocoons in the spring to disperse and mate. Female moths deposit hair-covered egg masses on the undersides of the leaves of their food plants. An egg mass may be deposited in either a single or double layer and can contain up to 600 eggs. Each female moth will deposit only one egg mass. Egg masses of the walnut caterpillar, another common pest on pecans, are not covered with hairs.

The larvae begin to build a silk web soon after hatching. As larvae consume leaves within the web, they expand the web to take in more foliage. All larvae within a web are the

offspring of a single egg mass. Larvae will molt six or seven times before leaving the webbing to pupate. The life cycle from egg to adult requires approximately 50 days under ideal conditions.

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