

Fall and Spring Cankerworms

Alsophila pometaria / *Paleacrita vernata*

The tender leaves of a wide variety of tree species are food for these voracious leaf-chewing caterpillars. Elm, oak and apple are favorites; however, they attack many other hardwoods including maple, linden, beech, cherry, hickory and ash.

Common names for these caterpillars are inchworms, loopers, cankerworms and measuring worms – so called because of the looping or measuring motion they make when crawling.

SYMPTOMS: Chewed and ragged leaves are unsightly, but of more concern is the stress brought on by defoliation at a time when leaves are needed to manufacture sugars essential for new growth. Research indicates that defoliation for several successive years can cause decline, sunscald and dieback, followed by attacks of secondary insects or diseases.

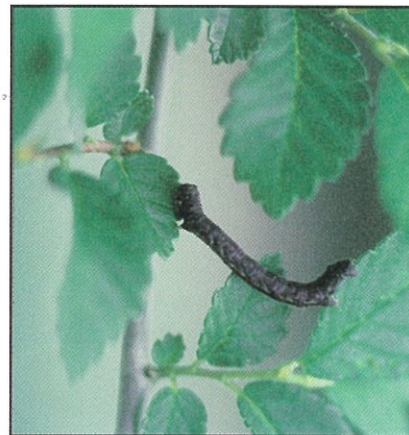
CAUSE: Two species – spring and fall cankerworms – are responsible for defoliation. Wingless adult females deposit their eggs on trunks or branches of host trees – one species in the spring and one in the fall. However, the larvae of both species hatch in the spring when leaf buds are breaking and growth has begun. Larvae crawl to the leaves and start feeding. At first they only skeletonize the leaf surface, but they soon devour everything except the tougher leaf veins. Feeding takes place over a 4- to 6-week period.

Caterpillars may vary in color from green to black. When full grown, they are approximately an inch long. When disturbed by wind, or after they have gone through their feeding cycle, they descend to the ground on silken threads. Because of their small size, they are easily blown from tree to tree from property to property.

SOLUTION: Cankerworm populations should be reduced so that less feeding occurs, thereby helping to protect the health of your trees. A treatment program for affected trees utilizing *Bacillus thuringiensis* (B.t.) formulations or other appropriate pesticides will help. Fertilization of defoliated trees is also recommended.



Cankerworm damage



Cankerworm