

“The Campers Are Among Us”

Eastern Tent Caterpillars

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I think most of us are glad to see the restrictions starting to loosen and that has led to a dramatic increase in campers on our roads. This article is not about those campers or campgrounds. This article is about the campers we find in our wild plums, chokecherries, and other fruit trees. The Eastern Tent Caterpillars are among us and now is the time to control them.

For my entire life my favorite wild fruit has been the wild plum. Just today on my way to work I noticed a new camper in my favorite plum thicket. Without control I could lose my entire crop which will result in the loss of my favorite pancake syrup. You guessed it, wild plum syrup.

Lots of times confused with web worms, the Eastern Tent Caterpillars appear in late May and early June. They form a web in the crotch of a tree or shrub. They are black with a gold or white stripe down their back. If left untouched they will defoliate the shrub and cause the loss of the fruit.

There are many ways to control them, but over the years, I have found a combination of ways that work the best. As a child we would wrap a stick with an old cloth, soak it in diesel fuel and use it as a torch to burn them out. While fun for a growing boy this was not always the best way because of the damage it did to the shrub or tree. We became more civilized and started to cut the branch with the web on it and putting it in a bucket of soapy water. Once again, we were damaging the plant. As we matured, we learned that if we misted vegetable oil or a mixture of one gallon of water and 2 tablespoons of dish soap on the infested area, control could be accomplished. Do not let the soap mixture foam, if possible. It should be done in the cool of the morning or evening. If the caterpillars are on the ground the soap seems to work better. If you are higher tech, Bacillus Thuringiensis or Bt for short is a selective insecticide that can be applied for excellent control. It can be found at almost any garden center. My method was to use a stick and twist the web around the stick. This would make it easier to get the mist where you need it. The mist was then applied to the caterpillars.

Now to the best part. Anyone that knows me can tell right away, I like to eat. Here is my recipe for wild plum syrup and remember I like to hold back on sugar so it may not be sweet enough for everyone. Put washed plums in a sauce pan and cover with water. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 10 minutes. Use a strainer to strain liquid into another container. I like the pulp, so I press the fruit to get more juice and some pulp. Put 3 cups of the juice back into the sauce pan and add ½ cup sugar or honey. Bring to a boil then reduce heat. At this time, add a mixture of 2 tablespoons water and 1 tablespoon cornstarch or tapioca starch. Blend well and sauce will thicken. When thick remove from the heat. It will keep for a couple of weeks in the refrigerator. I have a very good, from scratch, recipe for pancakes or waffles but that is for another time.

Thanks for reading. Until next time.

Todd



Figure 1 - Eastern Tent Caterpillars