

Spanning the Gap

What's in that Tree?



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Spanning the Gap
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Fall webworms appear during late summer and early fall in any of more than 100 species of trees. The colony of pale yellow caterpillars encases the leaves with its web. After feeding on these leaves for four to six weeks, the caterpillars

then pupate in silken cocoons in leaf litter or under bark. In summer, emerging adults are white moths with a few dark spots. Adults lay their eggs on leaves and when they hatch, the caterpillars begin spinning their web, and the cycle starts anew.

Though the webs are considered unsightly in gardens and on ornamental trees, in the forest the feeding of the caterpillars causes very little damage, if any, to the tree because of the time of year. By the time the fall webworm eats the leaves, the leaves have already completed their yearly tasks in the life cycle of the tree and would have died, changed color, and fallen to the ground anyway. A tree can survive year after year of complete defoliation (loss of leaves) by the fall webworm. They look like an ominous threat, but are, in fact harmless. The Eastern tent caterpillar (*Malacosoma americanum* Fabricius), which appears in the spring and becomes a small brownish/bluish/blackish moth, is far more damaging to the forest than the fall webworm.



Fall webworm (*Hypantria cunea* Drury) is the larvae of a member of the tiger moth (*Arctiidae*) Family. The larvae spin silk over the foliage of entire trees beginning in late August, and, within their tent-like covering, will strip the tree bare of all leaves. The adults emerge as summer white moths, sometimes with black spots on their wings.