

Stop and Think Before You Spray for Those Pesky Caterpillars

Now is the time of year when we all begin to think about our lawns and gardens. Dealing with common lawn and garden pests can be as simple as removing them by hand or setting a special trap designed to capture only the pest of concern.

When reaching for pesticides keep in mind that often they can harm beneficial insects and should only be applied in extreme cases. It is important to consider the pollinators (bees and butterflies), because without them our plants would not be able to reproduce. To find out more about the importance of NJ pollinators and ways you can protect them:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/feature/pollinators.html>.

Two pests of great concern in this area are the gypsy moth and the eastern tent caterpillar. Because of their similarities they are often confused. Eastern tent caterpillars are native to the U. S.; the gypsy moth was accidentally brought to the U.S. in 1869 in the hope it could breed with silkworms. Tent caterpillars and gypsy moths eat leaves in the spring. Deciduous trees (trees that lose their leaves each fall) can re-grow a new set of leaves by July and can usually withstand 2-3 successive years of defoliation (removal of leaves) without being killed. Eastern tent caterpillars may be ugly and unsightly but their defoliation rarely kills trees unless the trees are already diseased or stressed. Gypsy moths, on the other hand, can be of concern and may need professional treatment if the outbreak is severe over several years.

The easiest way to tell them apart is by appearance. The gypsy moth caterpillar has five pairs of blue spots followed by six pairs of red spots along its back. The eastern tent caterpillar has a white line down its back with light blue and black spots on its sides. For a comparison chart:

<http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7436.html>.

Also, tent caterpillars build webs in tree crotches; gypsy moths do not. Some simple techniques for reducing the populations of these insects without spraying are removing egg masses in the fall or early spring before they hatch and installing sticky wraps on trunks to capture caterpillars as they move up and down.

For more information: <http://www.state.nj.us/agriculture/plant/gypsy.htm>.

Happy gardening and remember most insects are good for our natural environment!