



Garden Tips

Little Green Worms? You May Have Winter Moth Caterpillars



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By Jill Kotch

I have been wrestling with winter moth caterpillars which have decimated the blossoms and foliage on a young crabapple tree. I should have written a note to myself last fall, but didn't, and so here is what is happening, and you are all most likely having similar experiences.

Operophtera brumata, which by the way is an invasive insect from Europe, emerges from the ground as an adult in late November to early December. Perhaps you have seen swarms of moths fluttering around near Thanksgiving and wondered why they were active. They are nothing to give thanks about.

Adult males and females are drab moths. The females are not able to fly as their wings are not developed enough, so they hang out on trees emitting sex pheromones until they attract males, mate, and then proceed to crawl up the tree to **each lay around 150 tiny green eggs** on branches and under bark crevices. The eggs turn a pinkish orange color later and are more visible. Just before hatching in the early spring, they become very dark in color.

Here is where I went wrong. You can **apply dormant oil** in the very late winter which will suffocate the eggs. You can also apply **sticky tape physical barriers** around trunks of trees known to be susceptible to the caterpillars to thwart their climb into the branches to lay their eggs. This is great unless you have a serious infestation and then the later emerged, newly mated females could climb right over their stuck sisters to deposit their eggs. Cut to late March of a warm spring or early April of a cool spring and the little green caterpillars ("loopers") hatch and then spin small silken strands by which they "balloon" down through the canopy until they wiggle through bud scales or bracts and into swollen buds to start eating. This is a very serious problem for fruit growers. No bud, no blossom, no fruit.

Bacillus thuringiensis (BT) can be safely sprayed to control all newly hatched caterpillars. The caterpillars develop into free-feeders moving from leaf to leaf in late May into June. Spinosad, or Neem can be used to control the free-feeding caterpillars. If not checked, they will drop to the ground, spin a cocoon and pupate, emerging to start the whole cycle again around the time you are carving your turkey.

Maples, oaks, crabapples and fruit trees are the usual trees affected, but these tiny green omnivorous critters will **happily hit on your roses or other perennials**. Mark your calendars or journals NOW so you can nip them in the bud.... before they nip your plants in the bud.