FALL WEBWORMS

Fall webworms have two to three generations yearly, with the largest usually appearing in late July into fall, hence the name. They can be found in more than 80 trees, but they prefer pecans. The numbers vary from year to year, and last year's fall crop was the largest in recent memory.

The webworm appearance this year is earlier than usual and suggests we will likely see heavy loads of worms from now into the fall, especially in pecan trees. Their number each year depends on the presence of many natural predators and the health of trees. Our spring rains contributed to an abundance of juicy leaves, and this is probably the major factor in our current outbreak.

Webworms build their nests out at the ends of tree limbs and feed on the leaves within the web. Although the webs are unattractive, healthy trees usually survive and emerge the following spring with no evidence of damage. Pecan trees might be an exception. With heavy infestations, pecans might produce fewer and smaller nuts. Smaller trees might be stunted from the stress.

When webworms appear, there are several coping strategies available. These range from doing nothing to physically removing webs in smaller trees to a host of insecticidal sprays to prevent spread of the webs. Doing nothing is what most people choose to do as trees invariably survive the infestation.

If an insecticide spray is used, consider an environmentally friendly "biorational spray". These would be ones that are less toxic and more specific for the target pest which include organic products containing Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt), horticultural oil or spinosad.

Some man-made insecticides labeled for webworms contain acephate, carbaryl, permethrin and others. They are nonselective and will only serve to kill both good and bad insects. All should be used strictly according to the label instructions. Since a spray will need force to be able to reach the top of trees and to penetrate the tough webbing, this might best be done by an arborist.