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Save The Trees

Sometimes nature seems a little out of balance. When hit with a plague of caterpillars, for instance, the effect on our trees can be devastating. It is a sad sight to see a dead looking tree because it has been completely defoliated. While not ordinarily thought of as a public health issue, the health of trees is intimately and inherently tied to the health of our environment and the very air we breathe.

Right now, during the last week of April to the first week of May, you can witness, if you look carefully, the birth of thousands of tent moth caterpillars. They are barely 1/4" long and only the width of a human hair. By the time you read this article they may have doubled this. They have hatched from their 3/4" long, charcoal grey colored tubes of egg cases attached to the branches of fruit trees last summer. You've had all winter to pinch them off. Any egg cases that survived to this week, hatched out 150-300 baby tent moth caterpillars. They proceeded to spin their fine silken threads in the vicinity of their birth and along any branches they traveled, so that they can find their way home in the evening. During the day they munch away, feasting on the leaves, returning to the silk tent in the evening until they are so large in size they can no longer fit. By the time the caterpillars move on to their dessert of oak and pine, the fruit trees are empty of leaves and barely able to survive while waiting for its second bloom of leaves later in the summer.

There are fewer egg cases this year, as last summer's humid weather allowed a fungus to take hold and kill many of the tent and gypsy moth caterpillars. This is the time to make a difference, while there are fewer of them and while they are tiny, to save your trees by getting rid of caterpillars before they begin feasting.

So, you didn't know you could pluck off those egg cases in the fall and winter? They were a lot easier to spot then when there were no leaves on the branches. Against the winter sky, they looked like a little charcoal bullets surrounding the tips of branches. You still have the opportunity to rid your trees of these pests now, while tiny, before they grow into monsters. If you look now you can spot the beginnings of those silk tents filled with tiny caterpillars. Just squish them with a gloved hand. Later in the season, when you spot a full blown "tent" in the Y of a branch, poke a hole in the otherwise weather proof tent, stir it up and spray some liquid soap in it. By using mechanics and soap, you have not jeopardized yourself or the environment with unnecessary chemicals and you have successfully halted an environmental threat.

Another way you can reduce the number of egg cases in your yard is to reduce the caterpillars' interest in your yard. They prefer fruit trees. You might have fruit trees you want to save but you probably do not want the wild choke cherry. These are the trees responsible for those hideous white nest all along the edge of the road later in the season. Cutting down baby choke cherry trees and off-shoots will greatly reduce the chances of having tent moth caterpillars in your yard. The bark of wild cherry trees is reddish brown in color with slender stripes encircling the branches and trunk. When you cut a branch, the acrid odor will confirm that it is indeed a choke cherry. If you want the tree, say for

providing food for birds, at least cut down and dispose of the nests as soon as you see them.

One more suggestion: Share this information by employing children in this environmental activity. Watch their eyes widen as they learn about nature. Enjoy their expressions of excitement as they make discoveries and expressions of pride as they feel useful.

Cathleen Drinan is the Health Agent for the Town of Halifax. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us

The Halifax Board of Health welcomes your suggestions and comments on this column.