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Management Guide for

Spring & Fall Cankerworms

Paleacrita vernata (Peck) and *Alsophila pometeria* (Harris)

Cankerworms will completely consume all the leaves on elms and eat bark off new twigs. Repeated severe defoliation causes branch dieback and finally tree mortality.

Hosts:
Primarily Siberian and American Elms

Also a broad range of other hardwoods and understory plants.

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Life History

Larvae of these moths are known as “loopers” or “inchworms” and are chronic pests of Siberian elm shelterbelts in eastern Montana and North Dakota. Periodic outbreaks also occur in Utah along the Wasatch front.

Spring cankerworm overwinters as larvae in cells in the soil. Pupation occurs in late winter and adults emerge in early spring.

Female moths are wingless and crawl up tree trunks to lay egg clusters in bark crevices or under bark scales. Larvae emerge in early May and feed on leaves until mid-June, then enter soil.

Fall cankerworm overwinters as eggs in rows on twigs and small branches. Eggs hatch about the same time as the spring cankerworm and larvae of both cankerworms feed on leaves of Siberian elm during early May and June.

Fall cankerworm larvae drop to ground and pupate in cocoons in the soil. Adults emerge in November or December and the wingless females climb trees to lay eggs.

Key Points

- Problems occur in shelterbelt elms.
- “BT” is a biological control that provides temporary control.
- Other tree species may be better for shelterbelts.

Biological Control

The bacterium, *Bacillus thuringiensis*, is registered for aerial and ground applications.

The planting of Siberian elm for shelterbe1ts should probably be discouraged.

Recognizing spring and fall cankerworms

Spring cankerworm overwinters as larvae in cells in the soil, while fall cankerworm overwinters as eggs

Look for larvae of both cankerworms on leaves from early May to end of June. Body colors on both species are varied and it is hard to identify them this way. Both, when full grown, are about 25 mm long.

The spring cankerworm's head is light and mottled with brown, and it has only two pairs of pro1egs, one on each of the eighth and anal segments.

The fall cankerworm's head varies from pale green to almost black. It has three pairs of prolegs, a small pair on the fifth, and larger ones on the sixth and anal segments.

Other Reading

Johnson, W. T., and H. H. Lyon. 1988. Insects that feed on trees and shrubs. 2nd ed. revised. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 560 p.

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Vasvary, L. M.1964. Cankerworms. NJ St. Agric. Ext. Leaf1. 345, 2 pp.

Forest Health Protection and State Forestry Organizations

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