

What's That Caterpillar Hanging From The Oak Tree?

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Have you noticed little white or green caterpillars hanging by silk threads from the trees?

What are they? Most likely they are the larvae (caterpillars) of either oak leafrollers or oak leaftiers, two different species of moth. Leafrollers are from the genus *Archips* and leaftiers are from the genus *Croesia*. This larval or caterpillar stage is one part of the moth's life cycle. The adult stage is a yellow to light tan colored moth with a wingspan of 12-25 mm. Moths lay their eggs on the small branches of host trees in the late spring. These eggs hatch early the following spring when the new oak leaves began to sprout. Larvae feed and grow for about one month and then drop to the ground to pupate. Moths emerge within two weeks. Females live for a few days and lay up to 100 eggs. Then we see nothing more of these insects until the following spring.

What is important about them? They can cause widespread and severe defoliation (loss of leaves) to trees, but this rarely happens in Florida. Usually there are several years of light to moderate defoliation, then insect populations collapse and we are unaware of these insects for a number of years. They can also be a nuisance to humans, but they are harmless.

What can be done to help a defoliated tree? To minimize stress to the tree, apply water during periods of drought. Continue this for several months following defoliation of the tree. There is no need to apply fertilizer because the caterpillar droppings contain nitrogen for growing new leaves.

Is there any control for the caterpillar? Natural controls (predators, parasites and diseases) usually keep these caterpillar populations at low levels. Mockingbirds and other birds feed on the caterpillars, and wasps are also a good natural control. For high-value trees or where caterpillar populations are especially damaging try using a biological control spray of *Bacillus thuringiensis* var. *kurstaki*. If all else fails, an insecticidal spray containing carbaryl (Sevin®) can be used as a last resort. Because specialized equipment is needed for this application and there are concerns about drift and contamination of the handler and non-target organisms this product should be applied by a pest control operator. The ideal time for applying an insecticide is just before the insects begin their last week of heavy feeding.

Since these caterpillars only have one generation per year they will soon be gone and you can once again walk under oak trees without the worry of them getting on you. Remember, too, that they are a source of food for other critters in the food chain and part of the web of life.



Photo from Dr. Foltz's article:

<http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/foltz/eny3541/Leaftier.htm>

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