

June 26, 2020
Bagworms

The second week of June is celebration time, that is if you're a bagworm. It is this time of year that newly hatched worms will emerge from last years' bags and begin feeding on our evergreen trees. Those old pine cone looking bags hanging on the trees are the source of overwintering eggs.

Once the tiny larva crawls out of the bag, some look to start munching on the evergreen, and others go ballooning. Ballooning is an aptly named free-wheeling process where the caterpillar produces a strand of silk, that catches the wind then floats to an unknown location. Their flight may end up landing in a lake with tragic consequences for them, in a non-evergreen where they may feed, but not like it, or in one of their favorite foods, a blue spruce tree. However, the caterpillars may also be found feeding on over 130 different species of deciduous trees and shrubs. So their will to survive is great.

The individual larva's ballooning percentage success rate is not good but, because a single female can produce 500-1000 eggs, the odds are good that a few of them will land in an evergreen patch. The first time I ever saw bagworms was in an isolated farmstead windbreak that had filtered a bunch of ballooners out of the air and they were devouring the arborvitae.

Let's concentrate on that statement, "the first time." Historically bagworms have not been a Northern Indiana insect. In fact, US 24 has essentially been the northern boundary line for this pest. When we have a single day in the winter when the temperature never rises above zero, the eggs will be killed. This pest has ventured into our area due to our mild winters and even though we may have met the temperature criteria a few times, there may be some protected areas where they survive the winter. Hence, they may be more of a problem in town. Our last winter's temperatures were no killer for bag worms.

A good indicator of bagworm egg hatch time is the blooming of catalpa trees. Soon after that caterpillars will emerge and begin feeding. As the insect feeds they cover themselves with leaves to protect themselves from birds. Caterpillars feed through mid-August before they become adults.

Small larva are easily killed by insecticides. By the time the bag is built and they start hiding inside, they become more difficult to kill, plus the major damage has been done.

My favorite insecticide for control of this pest is Spinosad, an active chemical ingredient discovered in the 1970's. It was isolated from soil collected inside a sugar cane mill and rum distillery in the Virgin Islands. It is a natural compound derived from the fermentation of a bacteria. It is considered a natural organic insecticide. Since the finding of this product chemists have developed over 200 synthetic variations.

What is neat about this product is that it seems to be more active on the insect bad guys than the good guys. For example, it is the product of choice for fly control and bagworms on evergreens. At the same time, it does not harm ladybugs and praying mantis.

It's a great product but do not wait too late to use it as the tree will be damaged and the bagworm may just tuck himself inside the bag receiving a smaller dose. I wonder if they wave as it goes by, just like in a parade celebration.