

Not all caterpillars are bad

GARDENING FOOL



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As Dallas entomologist Mike Merchant predicted, a second generation of webworms has hatched to defoliate not only our trees but also our ornamental annuals, perennials and shrubs.

Dr. Merchant, with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, theorized in June that the webworms' early seasonal appearance could mean a second and even a third generation of the pests could wreak considerable damage before a frost sends them into dormancy.

"They're called fall webworms because, most years, that's when they are at their worst," says Dr. Merchant.

His own sweet gum tree is full of the grayish-white webs and skeletonized leaves that are evidence of the caterpillar infestation.

Their webs are high above my back garden in huge old pecans and elms. But they also are eating the leaves of my dwarf Japanese maples, brugmansias, Confederate roses and other ornamental plants.

I eradicated many of the millions of snails and sowbugs that were my garden's nemesis earlier in the season by applying Sluggo Plus between rain showers, but now I have to mount another campaign against the innocuous-looking whiskery, white caterpillars.



NATALIE CAUDILL/Staff Photographer

The webworm population is so high the caterpillars are eating blooming plants, basil and anything else with tender leaves.



NATALIE CAUDILL/Staff Photographer

Install a butterfly nursery by planting rue, parsley and fennel, hosts for swallowtail caterpillars.

The transformation from a speck of an egg to a plump caterpillar to a beautiful butterfly never loses its ability to enchant.

The good news is that, unlike the infestations in my trees, I can reach the webworms eating my flowering plants. I pluck them off and throw them into the fish pond or the rolling trash bin, whichever is handy. I'd rather the garden chickens would eat them, but they are leery of the long, white filaments covering the caterpillars' bodies. No, the hens choose my hard-working earthworms in the compost heap.

"Webworms prefer pecans and mulberries, but they have a pretty wide host range," says Dr. Merchant. "This year there are so many of them that they're eating just about anything."

He sprayed spinosad, an organic product, on his sweet gum about two weeks ago, but without breaking open the webs first, to see what effect the product would have.

"I don't think I got very good mortality on those caterpillars," he says.

Pyrethroid insecticides are an effective killer, he says, if they penetrate the webs, but they also will kill beneficial insects, such as bees, and butterflies. A hose-end sprayer, he points out, will not reach the treetops anyway.

"For most people, the best thing to do is grin and bear it," recommends the entomologist. "If a tree is defoliated this time of year, it is not going to die, if it is otherwise healthy."

"Figure this is a bad year for caterpillars, and move on."

As long as it turns into a butterfly ...

I don't eradicate all caterpillars from my garden. If a leaf-munching caterpillar

turns into a butterfly, it is more than welcome.

I'm adding more and more parsley, dill, fennel and rue plants. They are hosts for the swallowtail butterflies native to North Texas. Since these plants are not grown for their flowers, I don't mind if they are disfigured.

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Local retailers usually have herbs on hand throughout the summer months. The bigger the plant when you put it in the ground, the better it will be able to generate new growth once a swallowtail lays her eggs and the hungry caterpillars hatch.

Ruibal's at the Dallas Farmers Market has gallon pots of rue, with its lacy,

gray-green leaves and sprays of yellow flowers. Rue often stays green in my garden year-round; I've seen four kinds of caterpillars on the plant at once. (Be forewarned that rue has a milky sap that can mildly irritate sensitive skin.)

On fire for a begonia

Because I am so mad for the incendiary orange, bugle-shaped flowers of *Begonia boliviensis* 'Bonfire', new to North Texas retailers this spring, I bought a dozen young plants to try out in hanging baskets (I was reluctant to put them in the ground or in a pot, because of the rampant snail and sowbug colonies, and the new plants are expensive).

Although I am disappointed by their showing, it's probably the gardener that's at fault. The plants do bloom, but they look bedraggled, hanging limply instead of mingling their fiery bursts of color with their companions.

I can't decide if a cutworm or snail weakened their succulent, impatiens-like stems or if I have not hit upon the right formula of sun and shade. (Plant labels are too generic for our climate's special problems, and I don't see any test results from Jimmy Turner at the Dallas Arboretum.)

I spotted them in plastic hanging baskets at Ruibal's at the Dallas Farmers Market location (\$24.95). They're in bloom, but the plants have not filled out; like mine, they droop. Mark Ruibal has transplanted some into mixed containers to gauge how well they work in combinations.

I've decided to replant mine so that stems can lean on strong shoulders; 4-inch pots of asparagus fern are the leading contender.

Call me stubborn (true). Call me impractical (true). But it will take more than a few failures to dissuade me from attempting to master this begonia.



Tesselaar

Not in my garden: Will my 'Bonfire' begonias ever look like this?

Nonagenarian shares pass-alongs to spread garden joy

By MISTY BAILEY
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Leta Bailey's landscape began evolving in 1950, when her Dallas home was constructed and Preston Road was still a dirt thoroughfare.

It took some time for her flower beds to fill in, but for years they have brimmed — so much so that she gave away lots of plants in July for a third time through Pass It On, the free feature in the Home section where readers list items they'd like to give away.

"I'd rather work in the yard any day instead of the kitchen. Oh, how I hate to cook," says the 90-year-old Mrs. Bailey, who lives in Preston Hollow with her husband, Joe.

Yellow cannas have moved beyond the chain-link fence into her neighbor's yard, and liriopse, mondo grass and other spreading plants are bursting forth. The beds also are home to amaryllis, coleus, Easter lilies, mint, Shasta daisies, ageratum, asters, English ivy, irises, four o'clocks, wild violets and lantanas, which have spiked to more than 5 feet tall.

An heirloom rose bush, propagated from a cutting she took from her mother's cemetery find long ago, has a special place to itself.

Mrs. Bailey, no relation to the writer, says she doesn't charge money for her plants because she wants them thinned out when they grow wild, like the cannas.

And why not give them away? Many



Photos by BRANDON THIBODEAUX/Special Contributor

Gerry Kelly (right) examines an aster clipping handed to her by Leta Bailey (center) and Anne Neikirk.

of her gems were started with cuttings.

She doesn't add amendments to her typical clay soil. She doesn't bother with fertilizer or mulch, either. She simply

periodically flips the soil with a garden fork and pours on some topsoil when what already is there becomes too packed.

"I don't tend my yard much," Mrs. Bailey says, confident of her green thumb. "I never feed anything."

Her generosity doesn't end at giving



A butterfly works its way across one of Mrs. Bailey's daisies.

away plants. She also gives advice.

"Never be afraid to take even the most delicate of plants in a pot and put them in the ground," Mrs. Bailey says. "That's how I've gotten so many special things."

Gardeners lucky enough to catch her Pass It On listings dig up the offerings themselves. Mrs. Bailey started asking friends and relatives for help with the giveaways after a lantana disappeared years ago. She says two women dug it up and left with it before she knew what had happened. The lantana wasn't one of the designated freebies.

Mrs. Bailey specifies what's for the taking, and there's plenty to choose from. But don't ask for the amaryllis, coleus or Gerber daisies. Gardeners should count themselves lucky to have what's growing abundantly, compliments of Mrs. Bailey.



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