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## Fall Cankerworm

### *Alsophila pometaria*

Fall Cankerworm caterpillars periodically cause defoliation of hardwood trees in Maryland. They most commonly feed on leaves of maple and oak, but also eat elm, apple and other hardwoods. During outbreaks, they can defoliate trees in the early spring. Coupled with other stresses, defoliation may result in branch dieback or tree mortality. Perhaps their greatest impact is the reduction in aesthetic value caused by defoliation and the nuisance caused by the caterpillars and their droppings.

### Appearance

Fall cankerworms are so named because the adult stage is active during the fall. Female moths are ½ inch long, ash gray and wingless. Male moths are active flyers and are light grey to tan in color with a wingspan of about one inch. The small, barrel-shaped eggs are brownish-gray and are deposited in masses of 100-200 on tree trunks or more commonly on small twigs. Caterpillars, which are active in the early spring, vary in color from light green to dark brown and when full grown may reach one inch in length.



### Biology and Life Cycle

Overwintering eggs hatch in early April usually at the time of tree bud break. Young caterpillars feed on the developing leaves resulting in small holes in the leaves. In heavy infestations and as caterpillars mature, they consume the entire leaf except the midrib and major vein. Feeding continues for about six weeks and by mid-May larvae enter the soil and pupate. They remain in the soil as pupae until the following fall. Adults emerge to mate and lay eggs after the first hard freeze.

### Management

In most cases heavy defoliation occurs for two or three years before natural controls, such as predators and parasites reduce the population. Healthy trees are usually able to withstand this amount of defoliation, but high value trees in the urban landscape may require treatment. While area wide control is often impractical because of the unpredictable nature of outbreaks, but local communities or homeowners may take steps to control the caterpillars. Homeowners may wrap sticky bands around trees to impede caterpillars and female moths. When necessary, insecticide treatment should be applied in early spring. Keeping trees healthy through proper pruning, watering and fertilizing will reduce the impacts of defoliation. For additional information, contact the Maryland Department of Agriculture at 410-841-5922.

