Leaf-feeding Caterpillars

Caterpillars, the larvae of butterflies and moths, damage plants by chewing on leaves, flowers, shoots, and fruit, and sometimes other parts of the plant.

Caterpillars hidden in rolled leaves or among foliage can be difficult to see or manage. However, many plants, especially perennials, can tolerate substantial leaf damage, so a few leaf-feeding caterpillars often aren’t a concern. Handpicking and natural enemies often provide sufficient control.

**Early detection and removal prevent excessive damage.**

- Look for feeding holes, excrement, webbed or rolled leaves, caterpillars, and eggs.
- Prune off rolled or webbed leaves and handpick caterpillars from plants. Destroy the insects by crushing them or by dropping them into soapy water.

**Caterpillars have many natural enemies.**

- Beneficial insects and other organisms often prevent caterpillar numbers from rising to damaging levels.
- Most caterpillar species have several species of parasitic wasps or flies that attack them. Look for parasite cocoons next to caterpillars, darkened caterpillar eggs, or exit holes in dead caterpillars.
- General predators include birds, assassin bugs, lacewings, predaceous ground beetles, and spiders.
- Naturally occurring diseases caused by viruses, bacteria, or fungi often kill caterpillars.

**What about pesticides?**

- Use insecticides only when damage is intolerable, nonchemical methods haven’t worked, and smaller caterpillars are present. Avoid insecticides that can kill beneficial insects. Don’t treat butterfly garden plants, otherwise you’ll kill the caterpillars that will become butterflies.
- *Bacillus thuringiensis* subspecies *kurstaki* (Btk) is a microbial insecticide that kills only caterpillars. It’s safe to use near bees, beneficial insects, and wildlife. Caterpillars must feed on treated leaves to be affected. Because Btk is most effective on small, newly hatched caterpillars and breaks down rapidly, treatment timing is critical.
- Spinosad is a safe microbial-based insecticide, but can have negative impacts on some beneficial insects.

**What you do in your home and landscape affects our water and health.**

- Minimize the use of pesticides that pollute our waterways and harm human health.
- Use nonchemical alternatives or less toxic pesticide products whenever possible.
- Read product labels carefully and follow instructions on proper use, storage, and disposal.