

Oakworm Overload!

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Are you feeling overwhelmed by oakworm caterpillars? Do you have droppings on your driveway? Have they landed on your lawn? Don't worry—aside from being messy, oakworm caterpillars are relatively harmless to healthy oak trees.

Although there are three closely related moths (*Anisota senatoria*, *A. stigma*, and *A. virginiana*) that feed on oak trees in South Carolina, the orangestriped oakworm (*Anisota senatoria*) is most commonly seen. At maturity, it is about $2\frac{3}{16}$ inches (5.5 cm) in length and has two long slender black 'horns' that project from the second segment behind the head. In late summer or early fall, it crawls to the ground and burrows into the soil. It overwinters (survives the winter) in the soil as a pupa and the adult moths appear in June and July. The female moths lay clusters of eggs on the undersides of oak leaves. When the larvae hatch, they are small and greenish yellow. When small, the caterpillars typically feed in groups and eat all of the leaf except a lacy network of veins. Orangestriped caterpillars mature and reach their full size by late summer or early fall. Older caterpillars are black with yellow or orange stripes running the length of their bodies. Older caterpillars tend to be solitary eaters. They eat all of the leaf but the main vein.

As a result of their feeding, small trees may lose all their leaves by midsummer. While healthy trees can tolerate feeding by oakworms, young trees may be weakened if they lose all their leaves several years in a row. Mature trees may lose enough leaves to suffer twig dieback as a result of sunscald, but won't suffer any permanent damage.

Control of oakworm caterpillars is not usually necessary, and it is impractical and unnecessary to spray large, mature trees. Sweep the fecal matter off hard surfaces and back under the tree—it's great fertilizer. Where possible, rely on birds, parasites and diseases to naturally control their numbers. *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) is a microbial insecticide that is effective against the young larvae (look for Dipel or Thuricide). Insecticides should be used on young trees only, where it is possible to get good coverage. Spraying a tree means aiming up into the tree and requires proper protective gear, including goggles, gloves, a respirator, and a spray suit. Always follow label directions.

For answers to all your gardening and food safety and preservation questions, call the Home & Garden Information Center at 1-888-656-9988 or visit us on the web at <http://www.hgic.clemson.edu>.