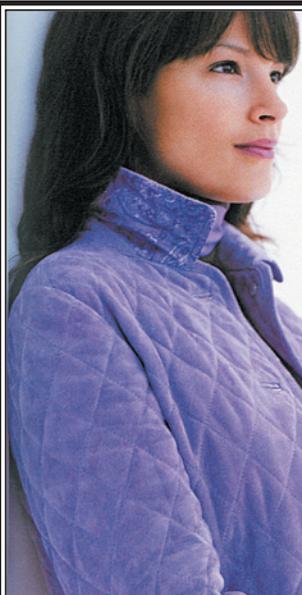


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IN THE GARDEN WITH MR. GREENJEANS

by Randy Arnowitz



Randy – Mr. Greenjeans – resides in a potting shed with 200 orchids and his golden retriever "Peaches." He enthusiastically welcomes your gardening questions; address them to greenjeansmr@verizon.net.

Attack of the California Oakworm

Like Ms Graham (see Letters to the Editor, p. 6), many readers have expressed interest, concern, and mild alarm regarding the defoliation of their beloved oaks, and the hundreds and thousands of "little wormy things" dangling from what appears to be sticky silk threads from many of them in Montecito and other areas of Santa Barbara.

I picked the brains of some of the experts who know about these things, and have assembled what I learned into a sort of *Dummies Guide to the California Oakworm*.

Q. What exactly are these pests munching their way through our oaks?

A. They are the larval, or worm stage, of the California Oak Moth (*Phryganidia californica*) but you can call them California Oakworm. Around here, they attack the Cork Oak (*Quercus suber*) and our native Coast Live Oak (*Quercus agrifolia*).

Is the situation worse this year?

Infestations of California Oakworms are a natural cyclical occurrence and can vary as to intensity. Often, naturally occurring parasites and predators



Look out below! Oak worms make short order of oak leaves

keep the populations in check but in the last few years the worms have appeared in numbers large enough to totally defoliate the trees.

Local tree guru and Board Certified Master Arborist **Sheridan Stanton** explains that deciding whether the infestation is worse this year depends on where you live. The numbers can vary drastically from neighborhood to neighborhood. Last year, parts of Isla Vista were hit hard; this year, sections of and including East Valley Road, San Ysidro Road, and the Butterfly Beach area have large populations. If your trees are embarrassingly naked and

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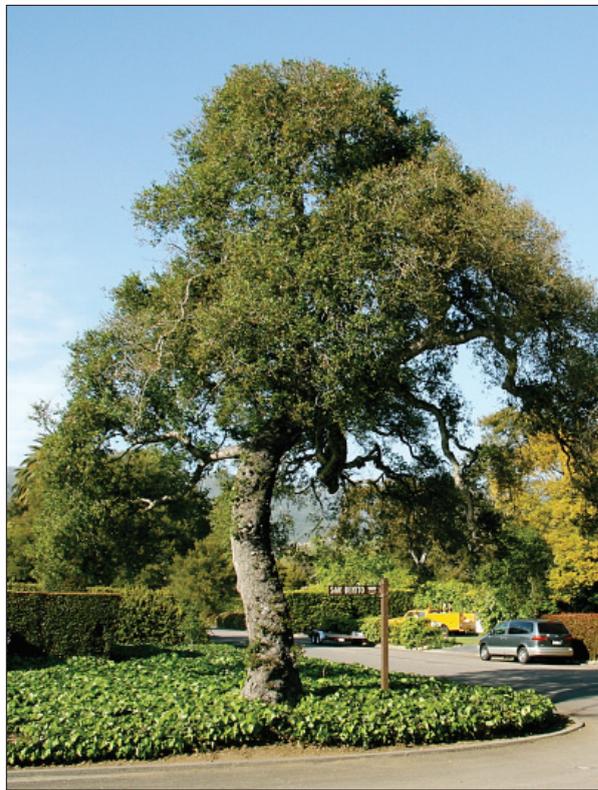


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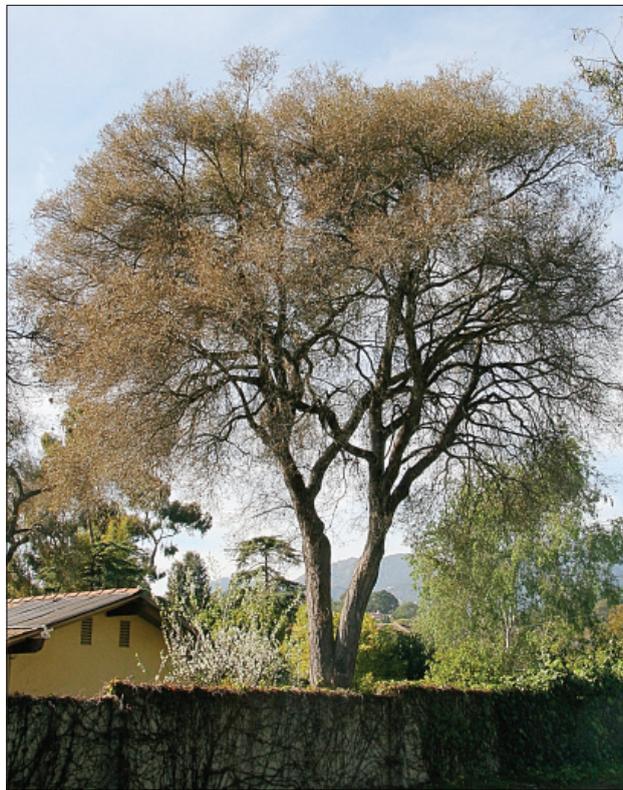
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Although the otherwise healthy oak on the right has been denuded of leaves, the likelihood is that it will make a full recovery without any human intervention



Let's review!

- Oaks can tolerate moderate populations of oakworms and may not need spraying when damage is minimal to moderate.
- Learn to recognize the eggs and early stages of the larvae so if you decide to spray, it is done at the most effective time. This is very important because *timing is everything!*
- If damage is excessive, contact a professional to help you decide if spraying is really necessary. When you spray, be gentle. Investigate "earth-friendly" and natural remedies to avoid killing beneficial insects.
- Healthy oaks are better able to fend off attacks by oakworms without spraying. Help yours to thrive by exercising sensible and thoughtful cultural practices. *My*



Oakworms are actually the larval stage of the indigenous California Oak Moth

not survive a severe infestation and defoliation from oakworms.

Should I have my trees sprayed?

To understand the answer to this question, you have to know a little about the oakworm's life cycle. I'll try to make this as painless as possible.

Normally, the larvae, or worms, hatch and begin feeding in the spring when things warm up. The larvae develop through five stages, or instars, and then become moths. The moths party, mate, lays eggs and the whole thing starts again. This entire cycle can take place three times in a season.

Unfortunately, by the time you notice the damage to your oaks and the crazed worms parachuting out of your trees the little guys have finished feeding. "Natural" or bacterial sprays such as Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) have to be ingested by the worms to do any good; it is for this reason that they are less effective when sprayed now.

At this time, the oakworms are more or less just a messy, nuisance pest and spraying will merely gets them "out of your hair," one might say.

In addition, the adult moths are strong flyers and even if you spray at this late worm stage, there's no way to keep the next generation of your neighbor's moths from coming by to finish off the rest of your oaks.

Aesthetically, if you don't want to have these creepy crawlers all over your house, patio furniture, and in your pool, or if you can't risk that beautiful specimen oak that reigns over your circular driveway, then you may want to consider calling in a professional to assess the situation.

On the other hand, these majestic natives have survived for centuries without our help and if you have a rustic, less manicured landscape with oaks in the back forty, it may make more sense to allow nature to do its thing.

you need an umbrella to get from your car into the house, it may not be that the entire situation is "worse" this year, but that your "area" has been harder hit than usual.

One thing is certain. These crawly guys are ahead of schedule this year. Normally, the worms have just begun to hatch and feed by early March. This year, they've already hatched, have eaten fast, and as we speak, are leaving the trees with big, fat, worm bellies.

Will they kill my oaks?

Robert Muraoka, pest control advisor at Agri-Turf Supplies, Inc. in Santa Barbara says that healthy properly managed oaks can tolerate moderate populations of oakworms and an occasional total defoliation without too much problem. In most cases, a healthy tree will quickly grow new leaves.

However, he warns that stressed-out oaks suffering from over-irrigation, extreme drought, compacted soil, improper pruning, or root cutting, may

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