

Zebra Caterpillar

The **zebra caterpillar** (*Melanchra picta*) is a very strikingly colored caterpillar, generally black with white markings and yellow striping. Zebra caterpillar will develop feeding on the foliage of a wide variety of plants including many vegetables, flowers, some field crops, and even a few types of trees. However, it is almost never abundant enough to cause damage to any of these plants as a great many kinds of natural enemies regularly will heavily impact numbers of zebra caterpillar throughout the growing season.

The overwintering stage is a pupa, which occurs in the soil. The adult moths emerge in May/June and females lay eggs in the form of masses, often containing over 100 eggs. Multiple egg masses are normally laid by each moth. Upon hatch the very young caterpillars feeding in a group producing chewing the surface of leaves in a way that produces a skeletonizing pattern. As they get older, the caterpillars disperse throughout the plant and chewing a bit of foliage, then moving to a new area. When full grown, they move to the soil, then create a small chamber in the soil within



Zebra caterpillars



Adult of the zebra caterpillar. Photograph courtesy of Ken Gray Collection/Oregon State University

which they transform to the pupal stage. About a month later, the adult moths emerge, mate and a second generation of eggs and caterpillars are produced on plants. At the end of this generation the mature larvae pupate and remain dormant until the following season.

In hemp damage is limited to a small amount of foliage, scattered through the planting. Damage to hemp by zebra caterpillar can be expected to be minimal and insignificant to crop yield.

Lepidoptera: Noctuidae



**(Top) Egg masses of zebra caterpillar.
(Bottom) Young zebra caterpillars feeding
in a group. Both photographs are from
broccoli/cabbage plantings, which is the
normally the most common vegetable crop
colonized by zebra caterpillar in Colorado.**