

NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

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Oak Wilt Awareness

Oak wilt is a serious tree disease, often misdiagnosed, that property owners with oaks should be aware of in the event it appears in your neighborhood.

Many remember the devastation caused by Dutch elm disease (DED) and American elms that once lined city streets. Oak wilt is a similar vascular wilt disease fungus. The fungus grows inside and plugs up vascular tissue, cutting off water flow, thus infected trees wilt and die. The worse scenario with oak wilt is a large pure stand of oaks with oak wilt present.

Oak wilt is most active early in summer and spreads by either sap beetles flying to fresh wounds or via root grafts underground between close trees. Root grafts occur when roots of adjacent trees, especially red and black oaks, join, and vascular systems become connected. The oak wilt fungus travels from one tree to the next by internal vascular tissue.

Oak wilt infection appears as entire leaves turn bronze or brown usually starting in upper portions of the tree. Initial wilting may be just a few single branches. Wilting spreads quickly though red and black oaks and they die quickly. White and bur oaks often survive.

Dead trees should be removed, ideally breaking root grafts before trees are cut down. Burn or bury wood from diseased oaks. Sap beetles can access wood piles, so remove bark and cover wood piles with a tarp sealed into the soil.

Prevent oak wilt infection by avoiding open wounds on oaks during the growing season. Sap beetles may visit fresh oak wounds in as little as 10 minutes and if carrying the fungus, trees are infected. Only prune oaks during the dormant season. If storms break a branch, promptly prune any jagged areas, and immediately cover with pruning sealer.

Professional arborists can inject oaks with a fungicide called propiconazole. This is intended to protect oaks, not cure oaks, from oak wilt.

Problems affecting roots and trunks can resemble oak wilt symptoms. Among these are injury from digging and damaging roots, placing soil fill over roots, or compacted soil over root zones. Dieback may not show for years after the root injury occurred. In addition, oaks have many minor leaf diseases and insects causing blotches or spots on leaves.

For more oak wilt details from University of Wisconsin Plant Pathologists go online to www.hort.extension.wisc.edu; scroll to General Plant Disease Diagnostics under the Resources tab. There is a tab for disease fact sheets and information on submitting samples to the University of Wisconsin Plant Disease Diagnostics Clinic for testing.

Interested in learning more about Horticulture in Iron County?
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