



OAK WILT

Adapted from Michigan State University Cooperative Extension publications

If you're considering getting tree trimming done this spring or summer, be sure to keep in mind that some species of trees are best pruned while they are still "dormant" (before new growth begins in the spring). This is especially true of oak trees due to the danger of oak wilt.

Oak wilt is a fungal disease which causes the water-conducting vessels in oak trees to become plugged. Once the vessels are plugged, water movement within the tree stops, causing leaves to wilt and fall from the tree.

Red, black, and pin oaks are highly susceptible to oak wilt. Once infected, the disease can kill these oak species within a few weeks. White and bur oaks are less susceptible. After infection, they often tolerate the disease for a number of years before dying.

Oak wilt spreads in two ways: by sap-feeding beetles that carry the fungal spores from infected oaks to fresh wounds on healthy oaks; and underground, from infected oaks to nearby healthy oaks through grafted (interconnected) root systems.

If oak wilt is not already present on your property or your neighbors', infection via sap-feeding beetles is your main concern. This is the only known way oak wilt can spread across open, uninfected areas. Published studies show that oaks are at highest risk of infection during spring and the first half of summer. Sap-feeding beetles which carry the fungal spores cannot chew through oak tree bark. Fresh wounds such as those caused by pruning or cutting, construction activity, or storm damage must be present for the insect to infect a healthy tree.

Oak wilt prevention is easy and effective. Do not cut, prune, or otherwise wound oaks in the spring and early summer, generally from April 1st through July 15th. For an even higher level of confidence, avoid pruning oaks from the first warm-up in spring (*March* this year) until colder weather in late October. During any warm weather periods (daily temperatures above 50 degrees), activities that cut or tear through the bark and expose live wood in oak branches, trunks, or roots can place those trees at risk of infection. If an oak is damaged during warm weather, immediately apply pruning sealer or tree paint over the wound. Torn branches or roots should be cut clean and the cut surface painted. For additional protection, cover treated roots with soil.

It is important to note that simply cutting down an infected tree, including stump removal, does not stop the underground spread of oak wilt unless it is caught early in the year it was infected. Removal later in the growing season or before implementation of other treatments (trunk injection, trenching) may hasten the spread to nearby trees. Often it is better to delay removal until late in the fall or winter.

Never remove infected wood off site without debarking, chipping, or properly drying it. Firewood needs to be covered completely for one year to prevent sap beetles from visiting the infected wood.

Oak wilt is established widely in the southern Lower Peninsula, with spotty distribution in the Northern Lower and Upper Peninsulas. One common method of spread is by movement of firewood. If cut wood from southern Michigan is transported to northern Michigan, it can be a source of infection for other oaks.

Oak wilt disease has been detected in Michigan for many years, but outbreaks in new areas are cause for concern. Since oak wilt is very difficult and expensive to control once it is established, prevention is the key to successfully dealing with this disease problem.