

Oak Wilt Showing Up In Infected Trees

The first signs of oak wilt, a tree-killing fungal disease, are now appearing in infected trees. Oak wilt occurs in the southern two-thirds of Wisconsin and affects trees in both the red oak and white oak groups.

"The first symptoms of oak wilt are branches with wilted leaves and leaves on the ground in summer when you wouldn't expect to see them," said Kyoko Scanlon, a forest health specialist with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. "These are not the brown, dry leaves you see in the fall. These are partially green to bronze-green and are not completely dry."

Oak wilt is a fungal disease that plugs the water and nutrient conducting channels in the tree. Once a tree is infected, water and nutrients can't move upward from the root system, causing the tree's leaves to wilt and fall, eventually killing the tree.

Oaks in the red oak group are particularly vulnerable to this disease. Once symptoms become visible, a tree loses most of the leaves and dies very quickly, often within a few weeks.

"Anyone with an oak tree that is rapidly losing its leaves may want to have the tree examined for oak wilt either by an arborist or forester, or send in a sample for a laboratory test," Scanlon added. "A person should take immediate steps to protect other nearby oaks on the property if they value those trees."

The University of Wisconsin's Plant Disease Diagnostic Clinic can help verify the presence of oak wilt. A sample must be sent to clinic and there is a small fee for the service. The clinic can be reached at (608) 262-2863 or via the Internet at <<http://www.plantpath.wisc.edu/pddc/>> (exit DNR).

Most often, oak wilt spreads from one oak to another through root grafts between neighboring trees. Removing a diseased or dead tree may not be enough to stop oak wilt from spreading. Forest health experts recommend trenching to sever existing root grafts to help control the spread of oak wilt.

"There are also fungicide treatments available, but they are most effective as a preventative and repeated applications are necessary for success," Scanlon said.

Wisconsin communities may be eligible to participate in a cost-sharing program to help combat oak wilt. The Urban Forestry Grant Program is not available on an individual basis,

and property owners with oak wilt are encouraged to contact their town or city forester or other local official to pursue a grant. Applications for the program are due by October 2, 2006.

Some instances of oak wilt are caused by insects that carry the oak wilt spores to healthy trees. To prevent oak trees from being infected with oak wilt transported by insects it is very important not to prune or wound oak trees from April through June, and to take a cautious approach to pruning from late March to October. Pruning or injuring the tree causes it to release sap, which attracts the fungus-transporting insects.

Additional information about oak wilt and other forest health issues can be found on the DNR Web site.

It's Not Always Oak Wilt

Symptoms similar to oak wilt may be caused by an infestation of the two-lined chestnut borer.

"The two-lined chestnut borer is an opportunist," Scanlon said. "It will attack weakened trees, favoring red and white oaks more or less equally."

The borer frequently shows up in areas where a forest tent caterpillar or gypsy moth outbreak or drought has weakened trees.

The adult insect lays eggs under the bark. When the larvae emerge, they eat their way through the fluid-conducting tissues of the tree, stopping the flow of nutrients to the leaves.

"The leaves turn uniformly brown, but remain on the tree," Scanlon said. "Unfortunately, an infestation of two-lined chestnut borer and oak wilt can occur at the same time, on the same tree."

Maintaining vigorous healthy trees is the best defense against the insect. Watering, mulching, fertilizing properly, and avoiding physical damage to trees should be practiced.