Oak Wilt…a lethal threat to our oak trees

The Town of Washington now has five confirmed cases of oak wilt - a devastating disease, killing trees rapidly in a single season.

Oak wilt is a fatal fungal disease that affects virtually all species of oaks. Oaks in the red oak group (oaks with pointed leaf tips) such as red, scarlet, black and Northern pin oak are most susceptible. Oaks in the white oak group (those with rounded leaf tips) such as white, bur, post, and swamp white oak are less susceptible.

The oak wilt fungus spreads in two ways: 1) by the transfer of fungal spores from diseased to healthy trees by sap feeding beetles, and 2) by movement of the fungus from a diseased tree to a healthy tree through root grafts.

Spores are produced on fungal mats on infected trees. Sap feeding beetles are attracted to the fruity smell of the mats. The beetles pick up fungal spores by crawling on the mats. Then they fly to healthy oaks to feed on sap flowing from fresh wounds, thus infecting new trees.

Once in a tree, the disease moves down into the root system and spreads to neighboring trees through grafted (interconnected) roots. This is the most common means of spread, and trees within 50 feet of a diseased tree can be infected.

Any injury to an oak tree can leave it vulnerable to oak wilt whether it be storm damage, pruning or trimming.

Oak wilt also spreads when firewood or logs from infected trees with fungal mats are moved.

Initially, single branches on infected trees wilt and die. Leaves on these branches often turn tan or dull green, starting at the tips or outer margins. Leaves may also droop, curl, or fall from the tree. Infected trees die. Oak wilt can kill oaks in the red oak group in less than one month. Oaks in the white oak group usually have less severe symptoms and are rarely killed in one season.

The highest risk period for transmission is from April 15 – July 15. During that time, creating fresh wounds on an oak tree can attract the beetles and bring in the fungus. If you prune/wound/damage oaks during that time, immediately apply tree pruning paint within 15 minutes to protect the tree.

Removing infected oaks is often the best way to manage oak wilt. Before removing trees, be sure to disrupt root grafts between infected and other nearby oaks. This is done by severing the shared root systems between healthy and diseased trees. The most successful way of doing this is to physically cut roots with a vibratory or cable plow or trencher. The barrier must be located correctly to be successful. Be sure to destroy the wood from diseased oaks by burning or burying it. Do not bring it to the brush site.

Prune oak trees only during the dormant season when sap feeding beetles are not active. If pruning during the growing season is required (e.g., due to storm damage) immediately cover wounds with pruning paint. Carefully monitor oaks for oak wilt and remove infected trees promptly.

To help prevent injury to oak trees, the town crew will not be brushing in the right of way from April 15 – July 15.

If you suspect oak wilt, please contact Linda Williams, WDNR Forest Health Specialist, at 920-360-0665 or email linda.williams@wisconsin.gov

For more information visit https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/foresthealth/oakwilt.HTML