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Oak Wilt

Spring is not far off, and for those of us who haven't done needed pruning to our trees, the pressure is on to get it done. Most species of trees are best pruned while they are still dormant. 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, they can die within a few weeks. White and bur oaks are much less susceptible. If infected, they can take months or years to die, or they may even recover.

Oak wilt spreads in two ways: over land, 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, or interconnected root systems.

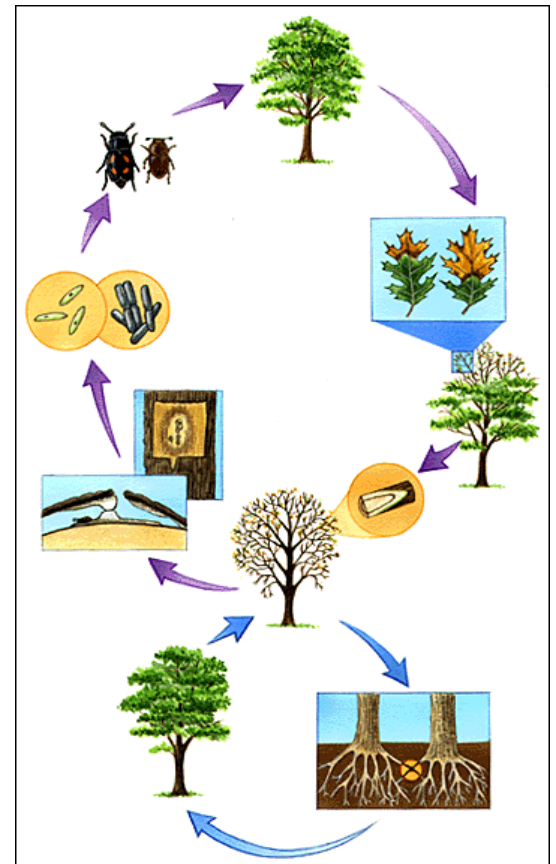
If oak wilt is not already present on your property or your neighbors', infection via sap-feeding beetles is your main concern. This is the only known way oak wilt can spread across highways, water, open fields or other large breaks in oak tree cover. Published studies show that oaks in the upper Midwest are at highest risk of overland infection during spring and early 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 15th to July 15th. To be very cautious, avoid wounding oaks from April 1st to October 1st. Any activity during this period that cuts or tears through the bark and exposes live wood in oak branches, trunks or roots can place those trees at risk of infection. If an oak is wounded during this period, immediately and thoroughly 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 does not stop the underground spread of oak wilt unless it is caught in the year it was introduced. Never move infected wood off-site without debarking, chipping, or properly drying it.

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. Cut wood from southern Michigan is transported to northern Michigan for camping trips where it can be a source of fungus the following year.



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 detected, prevention is the key to successfully dealing with this disease problem. The first step is to educate yourself about this disease and then take the necessary precautions to prevent oak wilt from becoming established in new areas.

For those who would like more information:

MSUE – Advantages of Winter Pruning

<http://www.anr.msu.edu/robertsd/pruning/index.html>

USDA Forest Service – How to Identify, Prevent and Control Oak Wilt

http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/howtos/ht_oakwilt/toc.htm

Michigan Forest Health Highlights 2010; pages 18-20

http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/FHH_344124_7.pdf

MSUE publication on oak wilt in Michigan – 2003; short and to the point

http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/IC4166-C_256344_7.pdf

Wisconsin DNR brochure for oak wilt/new home construction

<http://dnr.wi.gov/forestry/UF/Resources/OakWilt03.pdf>