

Oak Wilt and Ball Moss

Distribute 01-10-2019

Oak wilt is a fungal disease that attacks the vascular system of live and red oak species. In unusual cases, white oaks may also catch the disease.

Oak wilt is spread when sap beetles travel from a fungal mat on an infected red oak to a fresh wound on a live or red oak. The primary preventive action is to paint all wounds immediately after they are made by pruning or discovered if they are caused by lawnmower gauges.

The chance of infection is greatly reduced if pruning is done in the coldest part of the winter or the hottest part of the summer, but it is best to paint the wounds 12 months of the year.

If you have oaks, keep a spray can of pruning paint on hand. In an emergency, even latex paint brushed on the wound will protect it. The key is that the paint must be applied immediately after the wound occurs. The wounded tree is susceptible to oak wilt infection from sap beetles during the first five days after the tree is wounded.

Preventing oak wilt is certainly easier – and much less expensive – than curing it after infection has occurred. Do not consider a tree maintenance company that does not automatically provide wound painting in their pruning price estimate.

In live oaks, the disease spreads by 100-200 feet per year from an infected tree through the interconnected roots of the adjacent live oaks. This characteristic of the disease means that your neighbors must also protect their trees, if yours are going to be safe.

The spread can only be stopped by natural breaks in the root grafts or by trenching. An expensive, pressurized propiconazole fungicide treatment by a certified applicator will protect individual trees in the disease path but does not stop the spread.

Beware of claims by some firms that their products and or therapy will prevent or cure oak wilt by providing needed nutrients or relieving the stresses provided by a challenging environment. Although it is always desirable for trees to get access to an improved environment, there is no scientific results to back up the claim that such treatments will control the oak wilt disease. Rely on Texas A&M, Texas Forest Service experts for diagnosis and certified arborists using the proven treatments of pressurized propiconazole treatment and/or trenching to treat the disease.

Live oaks with oak wilt will die section by section in a pattern described as “flagging.” The leaves also show a distinctive symptom where the tissue surrounding the veins is yellow or red. Most other live oak problems show the color in- between the veins.

For photos of this symptom and other information on oak wilt, visit the Texas Forest Service website at Texasoakwilt.org

Oak wilt is a serious threat to our oak trees but ball moss is not. Ball moss is an epiphyte, which means it makes its living from the air. It lives on leafless or declining live oak branches in the interior of live oaks because it is sheltered and

the humidity is relatively high. The ball moss is not a parasite, it can even live on fences and power lines.

The branches in the interior of oak trees decline not because of ball moss but because of shading. To retain their leaves, live oak branches must receive enough sun to convert CO₂ and other nutrients to starches and sugars through photosynthesis. The horizontal declining and dead live oak branches are an ideal place for ball moss seed to land and grow. The plants do not penetrate the live oak branch to intercept nutrients from the tree's vascular system.

The best thing to do with your ball moss is to enjoy it as a unique part of Central Texas plant life. If it is not attractive to you, however, you can scrape it off with a long pole. There is also an opportunity every spring when ball moss is susceptible to spraying with copper hydroxide (Kocide). Enlist the help of a contractor with a powerful spray rig just before the live oak leaves drop in February or March.