

Oak Wilt Prevention - help protect our City's precious trees

By Dan Herron, Communications Director

As we embark on a new year, our city remains committed to preservation of our naturally beautiful and scenic landscape. The Oak Tree is a vital component of what it is to live in the Texas Hill Country. For these reasons the City of Horseshoe Bay makes every effort to protect these majestic trees by enforcing the Oak Wilt Ordinance which states that the maintenance of all oak trees, including pruning and trimming, is prohibited February 1st through June 30th. If your trees need pruning or trimming, please do so immediately and seal all wounds carefully with paint or sealant. Spring storms often cause tree damage that can render them unsafe during the months of February through June. Citizens must contact the office of Development Services (830) 598-9906 to notify staff that you have to prune or trim your tree(s) due to damage. All other pruning or trimming during the prohibited times may result in fine.

Historically, the City of Horseshoe Bay has received one notice of confirmed Oak Wilt disease on one property. According to the property owner he has been working with professionals to manage and contain the disease at his site for the past 10 years. To prevent the disease, City Officials have been working to educate residents on the effects of this devastating disease. Please join the City of Horseshoe Bay as we work to inform community members how to stop the spread the most destructive tree disease in the United States. The information in this article has been provided by the Texas A&M Forest Service's "How to Identify and Manage Oak Wilt in Texas" and can be found at texasoakwilt.org

Introduction to Oak Wilt

Oak Wilt is killing trees in Central Texas at epidemic proportions. It is an infectious disease caused by a fungus that disables the water-conducting system of the tree. All Oaks are susceptible trees, and some are affected more than others. The successful management of Oak Wilt depends on correct diagnosis and understanding of how it spreads in different oak species.

Establishment of New Infections

The Oak Wilt fungus is spread above ground and below ground. The above-ground movement is facilitated by a sap-feeding beetle that carries the fungal spores to new trees. Below-ground movement occurs when the fungus travels from tree to tree through interconnected roots.

Red Oaks, including Blackjack Oaks, Spanish Oaks, and Shumard Oaks, are key in establishing new infection centers. The oak wilt fungus is spread overland by insects and by humans through the movement of wood from infected Oaks to other locations. Live Oaks grow in large, dense groups (called motts) with interconnected roots. The fungus is transmitted from one tree to another through these root connections. As a result, patches of dead and dying trees (infection centers) are formed. Infection centers among Live Oaks in Texas expand at an average rate of 75 feet per year, varying from no spread to 150 feet in any direction.

Fungal mats form beneath the bark of diseased Red Oaks in spring but do not form on white or Live Oaks. The fruity odor of fungal mats attracts many kinds of insects, the most important of which are sap-feeding nitidulidae beetles. These small beetles transmit the fungus as they emerge from mats and visit fresh wounds on healthy Oaks. Fungal mats are most formed on standing trees but can develop on logs, stumps, and fresh firewood cut from diseased Red Oaks.

Identification of Oak Wilt

Leaf symptoms, tree mortality patterns, and fungal mats' presence can be used as indicators of oak wilt. The best recommended way to identify Oak Wilt is through lab diagnosis which can be ordered from Texas A&M Forest Service or by local certified arborists. A trained expert should always be consulted when in doubt to identify Oak Wilt.

Preventing New Infections

All cutting of Oaks (including pruning) is prohibited from February through June. If there are imminent safety issues that need to be taken care of before the no-prune period is over, make as few pruning cuts as possible and immediately paint all cuts after notifying the office of Development Services prior to doing the work. The least hazardous periods for pruning are during the coldest days in winter and hot periods in mid to late summer. Regardless of season, all pruning cuts or other wounds to oak trees, including freshly cut stumps and damaged surface roots, must be treated **immediately** with paint to prevent exposure to contaminated insect vectors. Any paint (latex, oil-based, spray-on, brush-on, or wound dressing) will suffice. If you are pruning high up in the tree's canopy, make your extended paint sprayer to ensure all cuts are being painted. Painting or sealing with a color other than clear will help Code Compliance officers see that the wounds have been painted.

Transporting unseasoned firewood from diseased Red Oaks is a potential means of spreading the oak wilt fungus. Red Oak firewood is not permitted in the City. Fungal mats may be on or form on unseasoned oak firewood in storage. It is best to purchase wood that has been thoroughly dried for at least one full year and from a source that can confirm it is not from Red Oaks.

It is not permitted to plant new Red Oak species in the City, but existing healthy Red Oaks can remain.

In closing the city wishes to thank you for your cooperation in Oak Wilt Prevention. For more information or brochures please contact the office of Development Services (830) 598-9959. Together we can enjoy the beauty of our native oaks for many years to come.