

Oak wilt hits Central Texas

Tree experts offer tips on how to prevent its spread.

By [Bob Banta](#)

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GEORGETOWN — Heather Brewer pointed to a giant oak tree that was slowly dying in a neighborhood in the northwest part of town.



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Heather Brewer, an urban forester for the City of Georgetown, shows examples of oak wilt symptoms in front of dead trees near Gabriel View Drive. The disease, which is caused by a fungus that causes the water-conducting vessels of oaks to clog, has killed thousands of Central Texas trees.

The tree suffers from one of the most dreaded diseases homeowners can find in their yard.

"People get very emotional when you tell them their oak has oak wilt," said Brewer, an urban forester for the City of Georgetown. "It's almost as bad as telling them they have a disease in their family."

Georgetown is not the only city where the disease has caused concern. Residential areas all across Central Texas are seeing the effects of oak wilt, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service.

Brewer does not have statistics on how many trees are affected, but the Forest Service estimates that 55 counties in Central Texas and six counties in West Texas have been heavily hit. City of Austin officials estimate that more than

10,000 oaks there have been lost to oak wilt over the past 20 years.

The culprit is a fungus that causes a tree to produce a compound that plugs its water-conducting vessels, reducing the flow of water up the stem of the tree. This causes leaves to wilt and fall prematurely, and the tree eventually dies.

In live oaks, one of the most popular varieties of oak in Central Texas, one section of the tree dies, followed by another. The disease is suspected if the area around leaf veins is brightly colored.

Because many diseases or environmental conditions can make a tree look that way, a diagnosis of oak wilt is best done by a professional, according to Forest Service officials.



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Experts suggest that homeowners use reputable tree care companies with sterilized equipment to trim trees. Trimming should be done during very hot or cold weather to help prevent the same fate as this tree on Gabriel View Drive in Georgetown.

Oak wilt

Oak wilt is a fungus that attacks red and live oak species. The disease is spread through the root system, going from one tree to another. It can also be spread by the sap-eating nitidulid beetle.

Evidence of oak wilt



Veinal necrosis

The fungus causes the vascular system of the tree to die, causing its leaves to turn yellow and then brown.

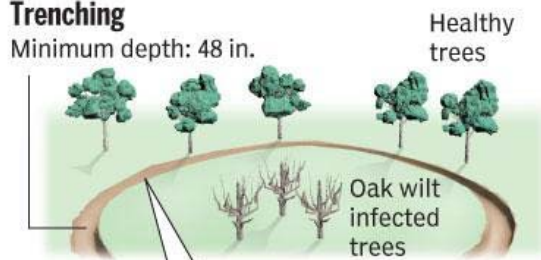
Fungal mats

Look for cracked bark leading to hollow areas beneath. Sometimes there's an odor similar to fermented fruit.

Containment and treatment

Trenching

Minimum depth: 48 in.



The root systems of infected trees are isolated from healthy root systems by digging a trench.

Sources: USDA Forest Service, Texas Forest Service, City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department

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per tree.

Avoiding oak wilt

- Avoid wounding oaks from February to June.
- Paint over pruning wounds immediately.
- Dispose of diseased trees properly.

For more information:

Tree experts offered the following tips for controlling oak wilt:

If oak wilt is suspected, commercial crews often cut a trench 4 feet deep and at least 100 feet from infected and susceptible trees to sever root connections and keep the disease from spreading through roots. There are also substances that can be injected into a tree to ward off the disease. Costs of trenching and injections vary widely, Brewer said. She suggests that homeowners get bids for these prevention methods from reputable tree care companies.

Trimming and pruning tools should be sterilized after use on an oak. Pruning should be done in the coldest part of winter or the hottest part of summer.

Beetles feeding on tree wounds can spread the disease. After trimming, a pruning paint should be applied to the cut areas immediately after the pruning to prevent beetles from feeding on the cuts.

"The beetles that carry the disease from one tree to another are attracted by the smell of a fresh-cut wound," Brewer said.

"A cut should be painted immediately or within several hours. After three days, painting a wound probably will not help."

Tips on fighting oak wilt

Fungicide injection

Fungicide injections help to prevent infection and sometimes help a sick tree recover. Cost: About \$300

Texas Forest Service, 473-3517

www.texasoakwilt.org

plantpathology.tamu.edu/Textlab/oakwilt.html

Sources: USDA Forest Service, Texas Forest Service, City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department

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