**Weekly Express-News Article**

**By Calvin R. Finch, PhD, SAWS Director, and Horticulturist**

Saturday, June 16, 2012

**“Questions About Live Oaks”**

Q. Why are live oaks so popular? We looked at lots in San Antonio and the hill country. Lots that had live oaks were much more expensive. The real estate agent said a large live oak on a lot adds $10,000 or more to the value.

A. All shade trees add value to a lot but most people think live oaks are especially attractive with their sturdy horizontal growing branches and shiny green foliage. They are also long-lived, very drought tolerant, important to wildlife, and tolerant of construction activities.

Q. How do live oaks compare in terms of growth rate? I am older and want a fast growing tree so I can enjoy it before I pass on to my reward.

A. Live oaks do not rate as a fast growing shade tree. Mexican white oak, Texas red oak, Mexican sycamore and Montezuma cypress all grow faster.

Q. Are live oaks actually evergreen?

A. No, live oaks drop their leaves every year sometime in March here in San Antonio. They are, however, very quick to releaf. Within a week or 10 days the new leaves are in place.

Q. Do deer eat live oaks or can we just plant them without worrying about them?

A. Deer will eat almost every shade tree until it grows out of their reach. In areas heavily infested by deer, there is very little tree reproduction that survives. Even those trees that survive browsing are subject to antler rubbing by the bucks which can girdle or break a tree.

If you plant a live oak in a neighborhood with deer, the plant must be protected with a circle of wire about four-feet in diameter and six feet tall. Keep it in place with three or more fence posts so the deer cannot collapse the structure when they lean against it.

Q. Are the live oaks identified as hybrids actually superior to normal live oaks? Do they grow faster?

A. All live oaks are hybrids grown from acorns but if you select acorns from “superior” live oaks that are obviously growing faster than other trees and or grow more upright it could be deemed accurate to say they are superior.

Q. Are live oaks susceptible to attacks by ball moss that gradually kills the branches?

A. No, ball moss does grow on live oaks branches but the moss does not kill the branches. Ball moss is an epiphyte that draws its water and nutrients from the air. It only uses the branches in the interior of the live oak because the environment is moist and sheltered. The branches are dying because they are shaded by the branches above them. The ball moss is not a factor. Ball moss will even grow on utility lines and many other types of trees.

Q. I know live oaks get oak wilt and it can travel through their interconnected roots. We love the look of live oaks but should we pass them up because of the threat of oak wilt?

A. Oak wilt is easy to prevent by painting wounds on live oaks as they are made by pruning; or discovered if the wound is from breakage or mechanical injury. I would only hesitate to plant more live oaks if the neighborhood is dominated by them. A diverse planting of trees is better than a monoculture.

Q. Suckers from my live oaks drive me crazy. I mow those in the lawn and use the string mower on those in the shrub border. Is there an easier way?

A. No, sorry, certain live oaks are prone to suckers especially if they are growing in compacted or shallow soils. Suckers, acorns, leaf drop and oak flower drop are part of the live oak natural history. They cannot be eliminated and I don’t know of any better way to remove suckers.

Q. Tell us about oak wilt on live oaks.

A. This fungal disease invades and blocks the vascular system. The disease first invades an individual live oak through a fresh wound where the spore has been carried by a sap beetle. Once in the live oak tree the disease spreads from tree to tree through the interconnected roots at a rate of approximately 100 feet per year.

Oak wilt is very difficult to stop once it is in a stand of live oaks. Breaking the root connection by trenching is the normal method. Individual trees can be saved from a fatal infection by the injection of Alamo fungicide into the root flares. The treatment is nearly as difficult and expensive as trenching.

Q. What are oak mottes?

A. Suckering is a reproductive mechanism that produces acres and acres of oak mottes in poor soils. The mottes have many trunks that emerge from a single root system. If you allowed your live oak suckers to grow to maturity, they would form a motte in your yard!