Combatting Oak Wilt

Distribute 12-24-15

Oak wilt is a fungal disease that has killed many live oaks and red oaks in the Hill Country and in a number of neighborhoods in the San Antonio area. It is a serious threat but relatively easy to prevent if property owners are knowledgeable and alert.

The disease is spread by sap beetles that carry the disease spores from the fungal mat on an infected red oak to a fresh wound on a live or red oak. The spores grow into the fungal structures that spread through the susceptible tree’s vascular system, eventually blocking vascular activity and killing the tree.

Individual red oaks (Spanish oaks, Texas red oaks, Shumardi oaks, and others) are infected and eventually produce the spore mat that begins the infection process all over again.

Live oaks are infected by oak wilt but do not form the fungal mats. The disease, however, spreads through the interconnected root systems of live oak mottes. Even individually planted live oaks naturally root graft with other live oaks. The result is that the disease can spread at a rate of 100 ft. per year through a neighborhood populated by interconnected live oaks.

Once the disease infects a live oak tree and begins its spread, the only way to stop the disease spread is to break the root connection ahead of the disease front by trenching. Trenching is difficult and expensive.

Individual live oaks in the path of the disease can be protected by a treatment of propocanizole (Alamo Fungicide) by a certified applicator (another expensive action). Unfortunately the treatment does not stop the spread of the disease beyond the treated live oak.

As difficult as it is to treat oak wilt, it is relatively easy to prevent new infections. The key prevention tactic is to paint fresh wounds on susceptible oaks with pruning paint (even latex paint works) immediately after a pruning cut is made, or as soon as another type of wound is discovered.

The tree is susceptible to infection through the fresh wound for about 5-7 days after which the tree’s natural defenses block entry.

Next week we will discuss symptoms of oak wilt and the role that firewood plays in spread of the disease. In the meantime if you want to learn more about oak wilt symptoms, prevention, and treatment seek out the Texas Forest Service website dedicated to oak wilt information and resources. The address is txforestservice.tamu.edu/OakWilt.