

Live Oak Attention

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Your live oaks have probably begun to lose their leaves. On or about March 1 the popular landscape species drops the leaves each year. The releafing happens so fast sometimes that you wouldn't notice the leaf drop except for the leaves on the lawn. You have several options with the leaves. They are valuable as a mulch or as raw material for the compost pile. I like them as a mulch in the vegetable and flower gardens because they are easy to move and can be walked on. Apply them 2 inches deep for row paths and mulch to conserve water and reduce weed germination.

The easiest option is to just let them decompose on the lawn. They will return organic material to the soil. Speed up the decomposition by running the mower over them.

Ball moss does not negatively effect the trees it grows on, but some folks do not like its look on the oak trees. If that is your attitude, now is the best time to treat the ball moss. With the leaves partially off of the trees, a contractor can apply a copper hydroxide spray which will slowly kill the ball moss. Through the spring the ball moss will fall off the treated trees.

Ball moss is an epiphyte (air plant) that makes its living from the air, not from the host plant. The ball moss seeds land on horizontal portions of slow-growing or dead branches within the tree and obtain nitrogen, CO₂, and moisture from the air. It will even grow on utility lines. Your treatment will be temporarily effective but new ball moss plants will be seeded.

Ball moss is a cosmetic issue but oak wilt is a real threat to the well-being of your live-oak trees. We don't need to panic about the disease because the infection mechanism is slowed by cold and hot weather, and offers several intervention options, but it is serious. The fungus disease enters the trees as spores through fresh wounds on the trees. The spores are carried by sap beetles from fungal mats formed on infected red oaks to the fresh wounds on live oaks. Once in the live oak the fungus cells grow to block the vascular system and kill the infected live oak.

The worst characteristic of an oak wilt infection in live oak trees is that the disease spreads from tree to tree through the interconnected roots. Live oak roots become interconnected in the soil as they grow. That interconnection means that the oak wilt disease can spread 100 feet or more per year through a forest or your neighborhood.

Individual live oaks in the path of the disease can be protected by an expensive treatment of injected fungicide and the disease spread can be stopped (sometimes) by deep trenches around the infected trees, but the easiest oak wilt prevention tactic is to paint all wounds on your trees as soon as they are made or discovered. New wounds are vulnerable to infection for 5 days after they occur.

The characteristics of oak wilt mean that every landowner with live oak trees has a responsibility to protect their own and their neighbor's trees from the disease by painting pruning wounds. The trees are most susceptible to infection in the mild portions of the spring and the fall. The spring period begins now.

For more information on oak wilt including the distinctive leaf symptoms, visit the Texas Forest Service Oak wilt website at www.texasoakwilt.org. The City of San Antonio also has an ordinance and information under the Oak Wilt Prevention Program.

Gardening Events March 3 and 4. On March 3 from 8am until 2pm the Bexar County Master Gardeners will be offering the "Cultivate" program with classes and exhibits that emphasize sustainable horticulture at the Incarnate Word International Conference Center at 847 Hildebrand. The Exhibits and Demos are free with a \$10 charge to attend the classes. Contact Anna.Vogler@bexarmg.org for more information.

On March 4 at the Floresville Civic Center the South Texas Landscape School is offered from 9am until 3 PM. The class includes lectures, numerous handouts, and individual consultations. There is a \$25 charge per attendee or \$40 for two from the same household. For more information and to reserve a seat call 830-393-7357.