

## Live Oak Leaves and Oak Wilt

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Despite the fact that we describe live oaks as evergreen, they drop their leaves every year in late February or March. I guess we still call them evergreens because the leaf drop is in late winter which is not usually when we expect leaves to fall, and the transition happens so quickly. The leaves fall to cover the ground at this time of the year but almost immediately the live oak branches are filled up with new leaves.

Leaves in general are a valuable material that should be recycled but live oaks seem especially useful. There are at least 3 options to consider in recycling live oak leaves.

- 1) The easiest way to make use of the leaves is to let them decompose on the lawn. Leaves return nutrients and provide organic material for the lawn and other landscape plants. They are a little slower to decompose than pecans, red oak, or cedar elm because of their denser mass but they still decompose within a few months. To speed up the process mow the leaves. That makes special sense now if you have winter weeds in your lawn. The rescue grass, bedstraw, henbit and chickweed are trying hard to produce seed heads. Keeping them mowed won't completely eliminate weeds next winter, but it may reduce the numbers.
- 2) Another excellent way to recycle the live oak leaves is to use them for mulch. If you have a vegetable or flower garden, or a shrub border. Rake up or catch the leaves with your mower from the lawn. They are also relatively easy to blow into piles with the leaf blower. Live oak leaves are small enough but with enough mass to sweep them up from the driveway, sidewalks and patio.  
Live oak leaves are my favorite mulch for garden paths and tomato and pepper plants. They can be applied relatively thinly at 2 inches deep and still provide insulation over the plants roots and reduce soil compaction under paths.
- 3) Another good way to use live oak leaves is as raw material for your compost pile. They are relatively nitrogen-rich and moisture full when compared to other leaves, so make a good ingredient.

There is less bagging and transport of organic material to the landfill now that most San Antonio neighborhoods have access to the green landscape material recycling bins, but the old option of providing your collected leaves to your gardening neighbors is still an option if you want to remove the leaves but also want to recycle the valuable organic material.

Another important issue concerning live oak trees is the threat of oak wilt. We are in the prime susceptibility time (Feb1-June 30) so avoid pruning oak trees if you can. If you must cut off a branch or a tree is wounded in some other way, paint the wound immediately with pruning or latex paint.

The disease is easy to prevent but difficult to cure and will result in the death of individual red oak trees and/or live oaks at the rate of 100 feet or more per year through the roots of the interconnected live oak trees. The symptoms usually show up in May when an infected red oak tree will have all its leaves

turn color and hang dead on the tree. These killed red oak trees and their firewood form the fungal mats that are carried by sap beetles to fresh wounds on uninfected oaks. Consistent with prevention avoid carrying moist red oak firewood from oak wilt infection areas such as the Hill Country.

Painting the wounds prevents the spread of the disease spores by sap beetles but once the disease is in place trenching to break the root grafts is the only way to stop the progress. Individual trees can be protected by injection of Alamo Fungicide by a trained and certified arborist, but the disease keeps spreading.

Live oaks die over a longer period as sections of the tree die section by section. The leaf symptom is usually a red or yellow color at the veins. Go to [www.texasoakwilt.org](http://www.texasoakwilt.org) for pictures and more information about the disease. The experts on the disease, and its treatment are at the Texas A&M Texas Forest Service and the local arborists that have been certified by the Forest Service.

Don't be deceived by claims that oak wilt is a disease that can be prevented or treated by applications of organic material such as cornmeal and extra watering. If you don't prevent it by painting the wounds and avoiding infected firewood, trenching is the only way to stop the disease spread in live oaks.

If you ever thought you might like to grow orchids and don't know where to start, start at the Alamo Orchid Show at the San Antonio Garden Center Friday through Sunday, March 22-24. The event is open Noon to 4 P.M., on Friday, from 10 AM to 6PM on Saturday and from 10:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., on Sunday. Admission is free but donations are welcome. Enjoy the exhibits and consider joining the Alamo Orchid Society. The orchid experts at the event encourage attendees to raise any issues they have in growing orchids plus there will be plenty of plants for sale to expand or begin their collections, in addition to the displays and judging by American Orchid Society Judges. There will be door prizes frequent raffles.

Visit "[sanantonioalamoorchidsociety.com](http://sanantonioalamoorchidsociety.com)" for more information.