

Hope is a Tree: Wait for the first hard frost

Ken Baker, October 24, 2023

Maybe Dad never shared these words to live by, but pretend he did:

“Never, ever prune an oak tree in spring or summer unless a tornado has ripped off a limb. And then, you’ll likely have other problems to deal with.”

But it’s no joke. The quickest way to kill a pin oak is with a handsaw wielded in the wrong season. It’s almost always best to hold off trimming a deciduous tree until it’s gone dormant following the first hard frost. But that’s especially true for the oaks.

And the reason is a fungal disease called oak wilt. Sap-loving beetles carry the fungus from tree to tree, but they’re only active in the warmer parts of the year, and they need an open wound to get at a healthy oak.

Members of the red oak group (red, scarlet, black and pin oaks) are especially susceptible to the fungus which penetrates a tree’s xylem tubes, blocking the transport of water to its leaves, and killing it in as little as one or two seasons.

It’s safer to cut off dead, diseased or unruly branches once it’s cold, but never, ever (Dad, again) cut off a limb flush with the trunk. There’s a swelling at the base of every branch called the branch collar. Cutting just beyond that allows it to form a “callus” over the wound to begin the sealing-off process.

Since the City owns the trees lining its streets, give the Public Works Dept. a call for any damaged tree out by the road.

(Note: Ken is a retired Professor of Ecology from Heidelberg University and a member of the Tiffin Shade Tree Commission. This is the second in a six-part monthly series on urban trees.)

Public Domain photo of oak wilt fungi growing under the bark of a pin oak for possible use in illustrating this essay:



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