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Oak wilt threatens trees

Pruning causes unnecessary risk

By Abigail McWilliam
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As Terry Robinson looks out over upper City Park, he sees hundreds of oak trees and a potential for disaster.

Robinson, the city's parks and forestry superintendent, is on a mission to inform Iowa City residents about an aggressive fungal disease, called oak wilt, that kills thousands of oaks each year in woodlands and home landscapes.

The fungus moves through the tree and prevents the transportation of food from the roots. Although symptoms vary by oak variety, the disease generally is marked by leaf discoloration and wilting.

"It's a problem people should know about because of the huge oak tree population in Iowa City," Robinson said. "And because there is something they can do to stop the spread of the disease."

Robinson is getting the word out that oaks shouldn't be pruned this time of year. Although City Park is safe for the time being, there is a chance the disease could spread through root systems. The other culprit is a beetle that preys on freshly pruned oaks.

The nitidulid beetle, also known as the picnic beetle, spreads oak wilt disease by taking the sap from a pruned tree and carrying the fungus on its body to the next oak.

"The beetles act like a honey bee, carrying pollen from one flower to the next, except they are carrying a disease," Robinson said.

The beetle now is thought to be active from March to mid-September, so oak trees should not be pruned during the high-risk time or the "green season." For many years, people were told the risk period was between mid-March and June.

Mark Vitosh, district forester with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, agrees. He said the best message to oak tree owners is to not to prune during green season. Although there is no cure for oak wilt disease, it's not as aggressive as Dutch elm disease.

"There won't be an onslaught of death for area oak trees," Vitosh said. "It's here, but we won't tell folks to stop planting oaks."

If oak wilt disease is suspected, Vitosh recommends contacting the local Iowa State Extension office or a tree service for a diagnosis. Several problems mimic oak wilt disease he said, including drought and some insect infestation. The red oak tree family (red, black, scarlet and pin trees) are more susceptible to oak wilt disease. The disease moves more quickly in this family, infecting trees and entirely defoliating them within a few weeks. The white oak family (white, bur, shinkapin and swamp trees) tends to tolerate the disease longer, Robinson said.