



# The Plant Doctor's LANDSCAPE TIPS

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## OAK WILT PART 2: HORROR STORIES

### INTRODUCTION:

Oak wilt is probably the most costly disease that property owners face in their landscapes, woodlands and forests. The high costs of oak wilt are due to 1) tree and property value losses, 2) tree removal, stump grinding, replanting, etc. and 3) procedures such as trenching and trunk injections needed to contain and eradicate oak wilt from the property and/or to keep the disease from advancing into neighboring properties. As with many issues involving money, the ugly side of human nature sometimes emerges. Following are some Oak Wilt Horror Stories I've collected over the past couple of years. Even though these are "Horror Stories," we can benefit tremendously from these accounts so that we are not "doomed to repeat them." Please note that I use the term "arborist" rather loosely in the following scenarios.

### #1 – SPRING PRUNING:

A married couple bought this home (Photo 1) near Grand Rapids approximately 12 years ago because of the abundance of trees on the property. During the spring of 2015, they contacted what they believed was a reputable arborist to prune their trees. Within one month of the pruning, most of the trees that were injured from pruning began losing their leaves. Oak wilt was confirmed; red oaks cannot recover once infected by the oak wilt fungus.

**Comment:** Pruning oaks during the spring months is the most common means for development of new oak wilt sites every year. Hence, Spring Pruning followed by serious Oak Wilt outbreaks is without doubt the Numero Uno Horror Story many residents in Michigan encounter every year. Many arborists know better but continue to perform this practice; some have been successfully sued by property owners.

### #2 – DEAD WOODING:

The homeowner of this lake residence in Photo 2 knew about oak wilt and confronted the arborist who intended to prune her trees in May, 2015. The arborist replied that he was only taking out the "deadwood." He further related that he had more than 30 years' experience and knew what he was doing. Every tree he pruned contracted oak wilt; every tree not pruned was healthy at the time the photo was taken . . . but is now in danger of infection through root graft transmission of the disease.

**Comment:** I am often asked if it's OK to "deadwood" trees, even during the primary months of oak wilt transmission by sap beetles. My response has always been a resounding "NO!" When any pruning cut is made, we often don't know if we've exposed live tissue to which the sap beetle is attracted, so that the transfer of the deadly fungus can be achieved.



**Photo 1:** Many property owners suddenly wake up to the horror that all their trees are dying simply because they had their trees pruned approximately one month previously, usually during the spring.



**Photo 2:** Many of the oak trees on this lake home are dying due to a practice known as "dead wooding," which the arborist insisted would not result in oak wilt infections. More than ten trees were killed, most not visible in this photo.

*Continued on page 22*

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Continued from page 21

#### #3 – SCAMMING THE ELDERLY:

The condominium owner on the left (Photo 3) convinced an elderly condo owner on the right that he needed to prune his tree because the branches would ruin his roof. The condo owner on the left was trying to defray his costs by splitting the



**Photo 3:** This tree contracted oak wilt when several small limbs were pruned from the tree because they supposedly threatened the roof of the nearby condo. In reality, a neighbor had convinced an elderly gentleman to prune this oak because he had wanted to defray his costs of removing two large oaks he had killed (oak wilt) behind his condo.



**Photo 4:** The lumbering industry is sometimes known for disreputable characters. Healthy trees such as these were strongly recommended for removal because oak wilt was only 10 miles away. The lumberman declared that preemptive removal would help to offset the \$4,000 removal cost for each tree if they died of oak wilt.

arborist's bill for removing two large oak trees behind his condo that had previously died of oak wilt due to his inappropriate pruning practices. Due to the pruning of several small branches, the elderly gentleman's tree subsequently contracted oak wilt. Note that none of the branches that were pruned from the elderly gentleman's tree pointed in the direction of his condo.

**Comment:** This incident took some investigative work by the author. Technically, because the condo association, not the condo owners, owns these trees adjacent to condos, any tree work must be approved by the Condominium Association Board. The neighbor on the left caused the death of three large oaks on condominium property as well as risked infection of many other nearby oaks. Justice sometimes prevails: the condo owner on the left (the scammer) was fined and was forced to assume all tree removal costs, tree replacement costs as well as finance the containment and eradication of oak wilt from the site.

#### #4 – THE ROBBER (LUMBER) BARON:

On the shores of Lake Michigan exists a parcel of land with many large, old oak trees (Photo 4) that have been in the care and ownership of the same family for well over 100 years. The property owner was contacted by a lumberman who claimed that oak wilt was within 10 miles of the property. The lumberman strongly recommended that the large healthy red oaks should be preemptively removed so that the lumber value would offset the \$4,000 cost of removing each tree if they contracted oak wilt.

**Comment:** Oak wilt might not be a problem at this site for many decades, if ever, provided trees are not wounded by pruning or storms. Other practical measures can be employed to counter oak wilt at this property. Furthermore, trees killed by the oak wilt fungus can be milled for lumber provided they are harvested within a reasonable period of time. We can expect an increase by some individuals to use a deadly issue such as oak wilt for personal gain.

#### #5 – THE SPIKER:

An arborist who pruned the oaks at this residence (Photo 5A) clearly knew about oak wilt; he treated every pruning cut with paint (Photo 5B) to prevent transmission of the deadly fungus to the wound by the sap beetles. Regrettably, every tree that was pruned contracted oak wilt. Why?

**Comment:** The arborist failed to comprehend that the wounds created by his spiking up the tree with his shoe irons (Photo 5C) was also sufficient to attract sap beetles and the lethal Oak Wilt fungus. Spiking live trees for pruning purposes is not an acceptable practice.



**Photos 5A:** The arborist who pruned the oaks on this site took great pains to treat every wound (Photo 5B) with paint to thwart infection by the oak wilt fungus. He apparently didn't understand that his spiking (Photo 5C) up the tree would cause sufficient-sized wounds for oak wilt transmission by sap beetles.



**Photo 6:** If neighbors are not already feuding, oak wilt can stir very strong emotions. In this photo, one neighbor is trying to prevent oak wilt on his large oak trees from root graft transmission from diseased trees (background) owned by a neighbor, who doesn't care.



**Photos 5B**

## #6 – THE HATFIELDS AND THE MCCOYS = BAD NEIGHBORS:

It is well known in our society that neighbors often don't get along. At a location near Traverse City (Photo 6) a homeowner's trees along the property line contracted oak wilt but the homeowner simply removed them as they died, not caring whether he lost his trees. His neighbor's trees were threatened with oak wilt via root graft transmission. Trenching was not possible due to proximity of the trees to the property line. So far, the neighbor who wants to save his trees has been doing so successfully at great expense for the past eight years by trunk injections of propiconazole alone, despite the continued "disease pressure."

**Comment:** The oak wilt fungus and sap beetles that transmit the fungus do not recognize two artificial human delineations: property lines and calendar dates (when to start or stop pruning). Failure of property owners to contain issues (such as oak wilt) to their property can sometimes become contentious if not litigious. If neighbors are not already at odds with each other, oak wilt can encourage them to become the feuding Hatfields and McCoys.



**Photos 5C**

## #7 – PROFITEERING:

It is not unheard of that an arborist, who prunes trees at the wrong time of year, causing the deaths of many oak trees, also wins the lowest bid for their removal.

**Comment:** Well, only in America . . . 🇺🇸

*For more information, please feel free to email David Roberts at [robertsd@msu.edu](mailto:robertsd@msu.edu) or contact a professional plant health care provider. The author, MSU and MGIA do not endorse any particular products. If using pesticides, be sure to read and follow label directions.*

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