Oak Wilt other FAQs (frequently asked questions)

What do I need to know about pruning oak trees?

Avoid pruning your oak trees from February 1 to mid June. During this time of year, the spore-carrying beetles are most active and oak wilt spore production is at its peak. However, when you do prune your oaks, use proper pruning techniques and paint wounds immediately, no matter what the size, with a tree wound paint*. This will help prevent the beetles from transferring the fungal spores to the wound. Wound paint should also be used when any injury, such as storm or lawnmower damage, occurs to oaks. When pruning multiple oaks, and especially when pruning trees in an area with oak wilt, pruning tools should be disinfected with either Lysol™ spray or a 70% rubbing alcohol solution. This serves as an added precaution against the transfer of the fungus.

* Painting tree wounds is recommended only for oaks susceptible to oak wilt.

Is it safe to mulch with or burn the wood from diseased trees?

Chipping or shredding the wood from infected trees to use as mulch is an acceptable method of utilizing the wood. The oak wilt fungus has certain moisture and temperature requirements in order to live. Chipping or shredding allows the wood to dry out quickly, thereby killing the fungus.

Smoke from burning infected wood will not spread oak wilt. In fact, burning diseased logs actually kills the oak wilt fungus. However, diseased red oak firewood (from Spanish, Shumard, Blackjack, Water oaks, etc.) should not be stored on a homesite because the wood could contain fungal spores or insects which carry the spores and have the potential to infect healthy trees nearby.

Firewood from infected trees can be used if certain precautions are taken. If possible, find out where the firewood you are buying came from. Be extremely cautious of any oak firewood coming from an infected area or area you are unsure of. When buying oak, make every effort to buy only properly seasoned (dried) wood. Dry wood does not meet the specific moisture requirements of the oak wilt fungus. You can be sure that the wood is properly seasoned if the ends of the logs are cracking and/or the bark readily peels off the wood.

It is also recommended to store oak firewood under a sheet of clear plastic and tightly seal the edges of the plastic with soil or bricks. Doing so will prevent any spore-carrying beetles from escaping. It is also
important to use clear plastic, as black plastic will reveal any escape holes to the beetles.

**Note**: These precautions need to be followed only for red oak firewood. If you are not sure what kind of wood you are using, follow the above recommendations.

**What trees can I plant in oak wilt areas?**

Planting a variety of trees is recommended to provide a diverse landscape that is less susceptible to attack from one particular insect or disease. The following is a list of suggested tree species to replant in oak wilt affected areas in Central Texas:

**LARGE TREES** (exceeding 40 feet in height at maturity)

- **American Elm** - This tree grows with a unique vase-shaped form. Tens of millions of these trees have been destroyed in the United States and Europe by the Dutch elm fungus. As of yet, trees in Austin have not been infected.
- **Baldcypress** - A majestic, deciduous conifer characteristic of swamps and river beds, but also grows well in yards and in urban settings.
- **Bur Oak** - An excellent tree for oak wilt areas. This oak is a tall, stately tree that can grow to 80 feet or more with large, beautiful leaves. Once it is established, it is very drought resistant. Its large acorns, with their fringed cup, give this tree its common name of mossy cup oak.
- **Chinese (Lacebark) Elm (varieties Drake, TruGreen)** - a fast-growing ornamental with showy bark reaching heights of 50 feet or so.
- **Chinkapin (or Chinquapin) Oak** - This deciduous oak grows up to 50 feet tall. Its saw-toothed leaves are shiny green above and fuzzy underneath. It grows fairly quickly and makes a good yard tree. A very nice tree and highly recommended.
- **Monterey Oak** - This tree can reach 70 feet tall. It's semi-evergreen; that is, it remains green until a cold snap in the winter turns its leaves brilliant colors (red, orange and yellow). Monterey oak is a fast growing oak and prefers a little more water than a live oak.

* Bur Oaks, Chinkapin Oaks, and Monterey Oaks are highly resistant to the oak wilt fungus and can be planted in areas affected by oak wilt disease.
**MEDIUM TREES** (25' to 40' in height at maturity)

- **Afghan Pine** - A fast growing evergreen tree well adapted to dry, limestone sites.
- **Bigtooth Maple** - Also known as canyon maple. Makes a beautiful ornamental due to its showy autumn color.
- **Chinese Pistache** - A fast growing tree with compound leaves that turn red, crimson, and orange in the fall. This tree is resistant to pests and disease, is drought tolerant, and is now widely planted in the Austin area.

**SMALL TREES** (8' to 25' in height at maturity) -- these trees are highly recommended in areas underneath and around overhead utilities.

- **Carolina Buckthorn** - A shrub or small tree that grows well in limestone soils which are typical of the Hill Country. The berries are a popular food among songbirds and other wildlife.
- **Crape Myrtle** - This deciduous shrub or tree is native to China. It's long, flowering period throughout summer, and attractive branch and trunk patterns make this a popular ornamental tree in Austin.
- **Deciduous Holly** - Also known as possumhaw or possumhaw holly. A shrub or small tree with bright red berries in the winter. These berries attract songbirds and other wildlife.
- **Desert Willow** - Not related to willows, this large shrub or small tree has willowlike leaves and small bell-shaped flowers which bloom in late spring to early summer.
- **Flameleaf Sumac** - A shrub or tree that has brilliant color in fall, turning red, yellow, and orange. The fruit is a cluster of red berries which attract numerous bird species.
- **Goldenrain Tree** - A small tree growing to 25 feet tall with a rounded crown. Its name comes from the long flowing clusters of yellow flowers.
- **Japanese Black Pine** - An evergreen native to Japan with an irregular spreading crown. This tree can be sheared into Christmas tree form or grown as a bonsai.
- **Mexican Buckeye** - A native shrub or small tree with a irregular crown reaching 25 feet tall. Fragrant, showy pink flowers bloom in the spring. The hard seeds are poisonous but are sometimes used by children as marbles.
- **Mexican Plum** - A shrub or small tree growing up to 20 feet tall. It has attractive white flowers that bloom around March and dark purple, edible fruit which wildlife may feed on.
- **Mountain Laurel** - A shrub or small evergreen tree with a rounded crown. Widely planted in yards around the Austin area. Has bluish-purple flowers in spring that have a sweet fragrance. The flowers and seeds however are poisonous.
- **Rough Leaf Dogwood** - A small tree or shrub with white flowers and a small white fruit which birds eat. Can be a problem in yards because it sprouts readily and may create thickets.
- **Texas Persimmon** - This small tree is well adapted to the limestone soil around Austin. The edible fruit ripens in late summer.

- **Texas Redbud** - This shrub or small tree is a member of the pea family. Its clusters of pinkish flowers appear before the heart-shaped leaves in the spring.

- **Yaupon Holly** - This evergreen holly can grow in extremely alkaline soils. It matures into a shrub or small tree.

- **Chitalpa** - A mix of catalpa and desert willow trees. Also see: Desert Willow.

- **American Smoketree** - A small tree or shrub with a short trunk. It is named "smoketree" due to smokelike fruit clusters and stalks of flowers.

**Do I have to remove a tree killed by oak wilt?**

Red oaks are the main concern for removal. On red oaks, the oak wilt spore producing fungal mats may form; these are responsible for the long distance spread of oak wilt. Therefore, once a red oak becomes infected, the tree must be removed immediately (under the city's diseased tree ordinance). The wood must then be chipped, burned, or buried. On live oaks, fungal mats do not form, so immediate removal is not necessary, nor is it mandatory as it is with red oaks.

**When should I inject my threatened or infected trees?**

If possible, live oaks and red oaks should be treated when the oak wilt is within 75 to 100 feet. Close monitoring of nearby oak trees is essential in identifying the oak wilt’s presence and spread. It is best to inject trees before infected, although there has been some success treating trees once they are infected. However, success diminishes rapidly the longer the treatment is withheld. The best candidates for injection are those which are immediately threatened, but are not yet showing symptoms. All live oak trees within a trenched area should be injected unless they have lost more than 20% of their leaves.

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The City of Austin no longer maintains an oak wilt suppression program. Please direct all concerns to the Texas Forest Service/LCRA Oak Wilt Hotline at 473-3517.