



A road crew in Oneida County performs roadside clearing operations on a winter day. Road crews around the state are reminded to schedule work involving pruning, cutting or wounding oak trees before April and after mid-July, avoiding the high-risk period for the spread of oak wilt. / **Photo Credit:** Linda Williams, Wisconsin DNR

Steer Clear of Oaks

Wisconsin DNR Reminds Crews To Hold Off Work On Or Near Oak Trees During The Oak Wilt Infection Period, April Through Mid-July

By Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

In 2018, oak wilt, a deadly tree disease, was detected in Bayfield County, hitting the towns of Barnes, Cable and Drummond. It was the first time the pervasive disease had been found in the county — an eye-opening moment and a costly and time-consuming occurrence for town crews and foresters in the area.

As the disease continues its slow but methodical spread throughout Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has a message for crews and workers everywhere.

It's a simple but crucial one:

Do not prune, harvest or otherwise damage oak trees from April through the middle of July.

Even one cut, intentional or not, could be all it takes to cause big headaches a couple of months down the road.

"It's incredible how that stuff finds a weakness," Bayfield County forester Jeremiah Neitzel said. "It doesn't take much."

Of course, similar lessons have been learned — sometimes the hard way — by municipal crews in many Wisconsin counties.

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'Let It Lie Until July'

The disease: Oak wilt, a deadly fungal disease.

The target: Trees in the red oak group are hardest hit; trees in the white oak group can also be infected.

The cause: From April through mid-July, wounding branches or trunks of oak trees could quickly lead to infection.

The source: Beetles carrying oak wilt spores seek out fresh wounds on oak trees and spread infection.

The approach: Workers should avoid wounding oak trees from April through mid-July, the 'danger zone' for oak wilt infection. If trees are damaged, the wounds should quickly be covered with latex tree wound paint.

For more information: Visit the [DNR's Oak Wilt webpage](#): dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/foresthealth/oakwilt

Take Care To Prevent Spread Of Oak Wilt

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As of October 2023, oak wilt had been detected in 66 of Wisconsin's 72 counties and established in 51 (see map).

The fungal disease kills every red oak tree it infests (northern red, northern pin and black oak) in as quickly as three to four weeks. If left untreated, it can kill neighboring red oaks by traveling through the trees' connected root systems. White oaks (such as bur and swamp oak) show moderate tolerance, with a slower progression.

Between April and July, beetles that typically feed on sap and sweet-tasting cambium (the thin layer between the tree's bark and its wood) are instantly attracted to the scent of freshly cut oak. If those beetles previously fed on an oak infested with oak wilt, they will transport fungal spores to the new tree wounds, spreading the disease. This process is the most common method of overland spread of oak wilt.

By September, trees infested with oak wilt will lose their leaves and die. The process creates hazardous trees, reduces private land value, reduces timberland value and has negative aesthetic impacts. The disease can be costly, as infested and killed trees must be removed, and treatment plans must be considered to prevent spread.

"In the town of Barnes, some pruning happened (during the no-pruning period) on the corner of County Highways N and A. They trimmed some small oak along the side of the road, and they ended up infected," recalled Neitzel, who oversees almost 175,000 acres of forest land.

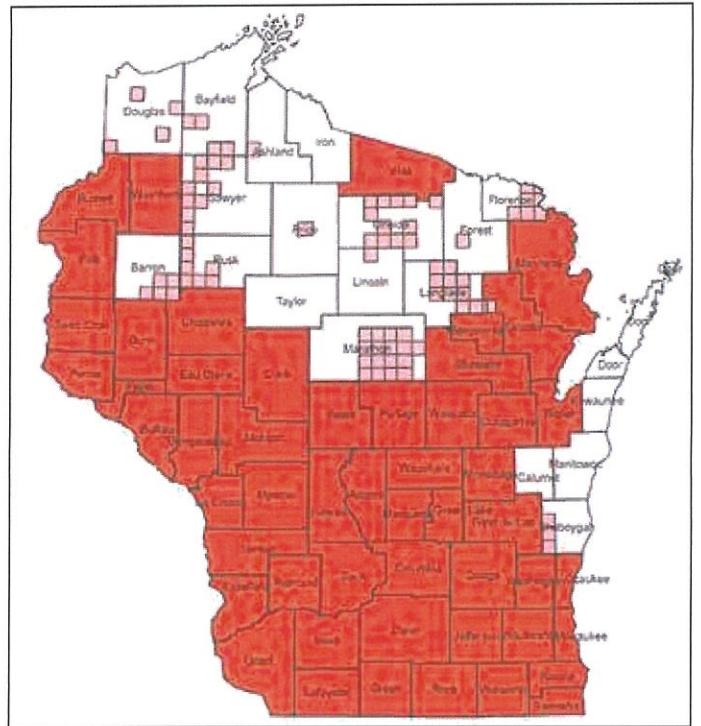
"That was the first incidence of oak wilt in the area. It has spread to the west of there since then, but ... the DNR has performed some treatments, and we've gotten the word out to the community. For now, we're holding it off."

2018 also saw an infestation to the east of Barnes, in the town of Drummond (treated by the U.S. Forest Service because the town is located within Chequamegon National Forest), and another to the south in Cable.

"In Cable, we think one of the original infestations came from some cycling trail projects performed by local mountain biking groups before we had given them any guidance about avoiding oak wilt. The project caused some root damage, opening the door for oak wilt," Neitzel said.

Neitzel joins a chorus of forestry experts who note that it's much easier to prevent the spread of oak wilt before it happens than to try and curtail it after it strikes.

"Treatment of uninfested trees is easy. Doing something with an infested tree is the trouble," Neitzel said. "Once a tree is infested, logistically, it's an absolute nightmare."



Oak wilt is generally established in counties tinted red in this map, which shows statistics through Nov. 25, 2023. Townships tinted pink are those where oak wilt has been confirmed in counties where the disease is rare. Oak wilt has not been found in untinted areas. / Map Credit: Wisconsin DNR

"Whatever you do, you must do it quickly. You can cut it, tarp it or burn it, but nothing you decide to do will be quick or easy," he added. "(Now) we'll try to cut it up into firewood lengths and remove the bark. Some sawmills in the area have kilns that we can use to kill the fungus. Otherwise, we have to let the wood sit for a year."

Linda Williams, DNR Forest Health specialist for the Northeast Zone, said a common source of new oak wilt infestations is when boom mowers (also known as flail, rotary bar, batwing or chop mowers) are used to work on rights-of-way or tree stands from April through mid-July.

"Mowing roadsides sometimes combines mowing herbaceous plants on the ground and then using those same mowers to remove tree branches," Williams said. "This can be an issue when the mowers create large wounds or leave jagged, shattered wood, especially on oaks, from April through July."

During the danger period, town employees are urged to bring latex wound paint along while mowing or performing other outdoor maintenance. That way, if an oak tree is inadvertently injured, a quick coating with the paint will seal the wound and prevent infection.

Neitzel said Bayfield County — like so many other counties and townships in Wisconsin — must remain vigilant.

"We fly (over forest land) every year, and we treat everything we find that we suspect might be oak wilt," he said. "The more we can do to keep it from happening, the better off we are."