

Most Late Summer Tree Damage is Superficial

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Once late summer rolls around, many homeowners start to get really excited about their trees and what appears to be insect or disease damage. The first thing that homeowners need to realize is that most of this isn't really damage at all. Secondly, by the latter half of August most tree species already have all the food reserves stored up in their root system that they need to get through the winter and off to a good start next spring. So just calm down and try not to fret!

Three things come to mind at this time of year that truly are a problem: bagworms, pine wilt and Dutch elm disease. Bagworms will kill junipers if left unchecked, but to be right honest, by the end of August, it's too late to spray. Pull off all the bags you can this fall and plan to treat next year in June. Pine wilt will become noticeable in coming weeks. Pine trees will go from nice and green, to grayish green to brown in four to six weeks. There's nothing that can be done for this disease other than to cut down and burn the dead trees. Dutch elm disease is also showing up right now. Leaves on American and red elms suddenly start to turn yellow and then quickly turn brown. If the tree doesn't die this year, it will early next year. Once you see the symptoms there is nothing that can be done.

Now that the bad news is out of the way, we can turn to all the other things that may look bad, but really aren't. Fall webworms are starting to show up. These masses of caterpillars enclose the end of tree branches with webbing and then eat the leaves that are enclosed in the webbing. If they eat all the leaves, they just make a larger webbing and enclose more leaves. It looks ugly and the webbing will probably stay on until next year, but don't waste your time or money trying to do anything. Most attempts at removing the bags or killing the caterpillars ends up causing more damage than the caterpillars do!

Oak trees are starting to sport a lot of dead branch tips. These are caused by a disease known as botryosphaeria canker. This disease infects small branch tips earlier in the year, causes a canker (dead spot) to develop which causes the branch tip to die. While very obvious in some trees, the amount of leaf area lost is not significant. Additionally, the time of infection, which is when sprays would have been needed, was weeks ago so treatment now won't do any good. The tips will break out and fall from the tree this fall and are nothing to worry about.

Naturally, if you start seeing dead leaves in other trees, or on the ground under the tree, there's a couple of other things to look for. Periodically, the wind blows pretty hard in Kansas. Make sure the dead leaves aren't from a branch broken in the wind. The other culprit can be squirrels. Squirrels are going to get busy pretty soon building winter nests. When they do this, they clip off branch tips which fall to the ground, the squirrels gather these up and build their bulky winter nest. If you start finding these branch tips on the ground, leave them for the squirrels who will just cut more if you start picking them up!

We're also seeing a fair amount of scorch in trees this year. Scorch is dying leaf tissue in trees caused by the inability of the tree to move enough water to make up for water evaporation from the leaf. Make sure trees are well watered, but know that some scorch shows up every year. Scorch can also be made worse by iron chlorosis. This iron shortage causes yellowish leaves. The remedy for this can be time intensive so give me a call. But realize that most causes of tree leaf damage at this time of year require no action from you. If you do have questions, give me a call or email me a photo and we'll talk about it!