

## Why Are The Leaves Falling Off My Tree?

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I love this time of year! Everything is turning green. Flowers are starting to bloom. Leaves are falling off the trees. Wait! Isn't leaf fall supposed to happen in October? Normally we don't expect to see a lot of leaves falling off trees in May, or June, but this year, through a combination of factors, we are seeing and will probably continue to see leaf fall now.

Two things can cause leaf fall at this time of year. One is leaf diseases, the second is insect infestation. The bad news is that once the leaves start to fall, there's nothing you can do to stop it. The good news is that it doesn't really matter and ultimately doesn't really hurt the tree. It's early enough in the season that the trees will just leaf back out in a few weeks and still have all summer to get the food reserves in their roots replenished. But let's talk about several species that we are seeing leaf drop on and why.

Basically there's only about on species dropping leaves right now because of insects and that is hackberry. There is a small insect called a Hackberry Psyllid that feeds on hackberry leaves. If you've ever noticed the little warty bumps on hackberry leaves, especially in the fall, this is Hackberry Psyllid. If you've ever had thousands of little black gnat looking insects on the outside of your house in the fall, these are the psyllids. These insects come out of hibernation in the spring just as the hackberry leaves start coming out. The females lay eggs on the emerging leaves. The small larval psyllid starts to feed on the leaf surface and the leaf grows the little warty bump over the insect. If there are a lot of little psyllids feeding on the leaf, the tree will shed these leaves and grow more that will then be free of the insect pest. These heavily infested leaves are now falling off. No treatment or action is needed.

Elms, maples, ash and sycamore trees are all losing leaves now, or most likely soon will be. This is due to one of several different leaf diseases. Wet weather, as new leaves are coming out in the spring, create a perfect storm opportunity for foliar diseases. The wet weather is good for the disease. The new leaf is very tender and easily attacked by the disease organisms. The moderate temperatures allow the disease to quickly spread through the leaf. Ultimately the leaves die or are so severely damaged (no longer able to carry on photosynthesis), that they drop off the tree.

Sycamores seem to have anthracnose every year. In years of severe infestation it will even kill the branch tips. Sycamores and anthracnose have had this relationship for centuries. If you look at branches on sycamore trees, they will often have a zig zag appearance due to having to start regrowing at a live bud back from the tip. I think it gives them character. Maples can also get anthracnose, just a different version. Elms get a disease called taphrina. Ashes can get a type of leaf rust (different than the leaf rust that attacks wheat!) Many times if you pick up the leaves you can see the leaf spots developing on them.

Fungicides can prevent these diseases IF they are applied before the infection period and IF they are reapplied as new leaves come out and IF you can get good thorough coverage of the tree. That's a lot of ifs and you don't even want to know about the cost! These diseases are also only a problem early in the season. In most cases, new leaves that come out will not be exposed to the disease and won't develop symptoms. All will be well. Take note of the falling leaves, but don't panic about this problem. Bagworms are another story, but we're still several weeks away from doing anything about them, however!