

Time to Start Checking Trees for Defects

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Trees are living breathing entities. Like all of us, they have life spans. Some species of trees have long life spans, some have short life spans. Just like humans, the actual limit to their life is dependent on their individual genetics, the environment they have lived in, and the care they've been given. A species of tree may be naturally short lived but if it is well cared for in a good environment it may well exceed the average life span for its species. Likewise, a long lived tree like an oak, placed in the wrong location and not given good care may well die centuries before it should.

Homeowners regularly contact me concerned about a tree in their yard. Sometimes they've heard a report of a limb falling on a friend's house, or sometimes they just see something in the tree that they feel may be a problem. Unfortunately, there is no way to predict when a tree or a branch on a tree may fail. I've seen limbs break on trees that had no visible signs of problems, externally or internally. Other times I've seen hollow trees stand for years without failing. However, there are certain clues that we look for to indicate that a tree may be at a greater risk of failing.

As humans we may have arthritis in our shoulders or bad knees or many other maladies of an aging body. As trees age, they too start to develop issues; we call them defects. The most common defect is internal rot. As a tree ages, the inside of the tree can become more prone to decay. Decay will usually enter the interior of the tree through an injury, which is anything that breaks through the bark. It may be a limb that is broken off in a wind or ice storm or it may be a pruning cut.

The majority of the activity in a tree is in the outer inch or two of the trunk, including the bark. This is where the critical vessels that move water and nutrients up and down the tree are located. All the rest of the interior of the tree is support. If an injury to the tree occurs, the tree will take steps to seal off that part of the tree from the rest of the interior of the tree. The tree creates special cells within the wood. Different species of trees do a better job of this than others. Trees like oaks and walnuts do a good job of sealing off injuries. Trees like silver maples, hackberries and elms don't do such a good job. In general, the faster a tree grows, the poorer job it does of sealing off injuries.

Homeowners need to be aware of the condition of their trees at all times. Every changing season provides us with new opportunities to evaluate our trees. In the spring and summer, with warmer temperatures and increased rainfall, it becomes a good time to look for fungus or mushrooms growing out of trees. Mushrooms, and the fungus that causes them, are only going to grow on decaying wood. If mushrooms are growing out of your tree, especially the main trunk or roots, it isn't a good sign and an inspection of the tree is in order. The fall and winter of the year are good times to be on the lookout for developing cracks where branches are not well attached to the tree. Cracks are signs of pending failure and where they are located can be an indicator of the seriousness of the issue.

As you are raking leaves and doing other yard work later this fall, take some time to critically examine your trees. If you see things that don't look right or concern you, give me a call so we can set up a time when I can come and examine the tree with you. Then we can determine how much risk there may be and what corrective action may need to be taken.