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Watch Out For Root Rot!

As you might imagine, I get regular calls from folks who are concerned about the health of their important trees. One may report that they have seen a strange formation at the base of their tree that they believe just doesn't belong there. They are afraid that it may be harmful. Now and again their descriptions will go something like this: "Yes, it's a large brown to black and hard horseshoe shaped thing that is growing right on the tree at the bottom. It almost looks extraterrestrial, almost "spooky!"

As likely as not that is a layman's description of the reproductive above-ground parts of a soil-borne fungal rot called Ganoderma. It can sometimes be tan to orange in color and the growth they report can range in size from a few inches to eighteen (18") inches across. This rot disease can infect many species of woody stem plants. However it is most commonly seen in the Mid-South around the bottom of mature large oaks that are in a frequently wet environment and whose base is shielded from sunlight and air flow by excess mulch, multiple seasons of rotting leaf accumulations and/or old and thickly surrounding ornamentals. These situations not only encourage the presence of Ganoderma but also frequently hide it from discovery until its damage is advanced.

Interestingly, this pathogenic fungus is also known to have beneficial properties for medicine and pharmacology. But for those of us who value our mature trees it is primarily a sign of serious and persistent trouble. The appearance of fruiting bodies like these is a sure indicator that some root damage has occurred and/or is occurring to nearby buttress roots, those large diameter roots that support the entire tree. The question then becomes how many roots are impacted and to what extent. Root damage on the windward side (northwest to southwest) of large trees can be serious when people, houses or other property are located on the opposite side. The disease frequently does its damage from the bottom up, hollowing out a large support root from below while the above ground part still looks normal. Once established, Ganoderma is nearly impossible to eradicate and the best response is control and suppression through good cultural practices.

Another universal species of root rot that occurs locally is *Armillaria mellea*. Symptoms of this disease can be reduced growth and a slow decline characterized by yellowing leaves and twig and branch dieback. Another sign can be the appearance in the fall of tannish brown to cream colored toadstools around the base of an infected tree. Yet in some cases trees infected with *Armillaria*

will exhibit few of these symptoms before falling over due to root compromise. *Armillaria* is also characterized by white fungal "mats" under usually loose bark. These mats are seen with black shoestring-like rhizomorphs that carry nutrient to the white disease fungus and travel back to nearby rotted stumps, infected rotting leaf piles or to the soil itself.

Sadly, the innocent but contributory actions of the owner encourage this problem or make the situation worse. Avoid soil level grade changes near important trees. Do not plant thick growing ornamentals close around important trees. Supplementally water long and slow but only once a week during dry periods. Make periodic inspections, especially around on the backside of important large trees. And if you see evidence of *Ganoderma* or *Armillaria* that may affect a significant part of the basal circumference, consult with a certified arborist.

In almost all cases the key to prevention and remediation is a little knowledge and vigilance. And if a few changes are needed, sooner is better than later.

