

About Trees: Hot, dry summer tough on limbs

By Fred Morgan

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From an arborist's point of view, several things were interesting about this summer season.

One of them was the pestilence-level plague of webworms that showed up to gross us out in our birches, persimmons, hickories, pecans and sycamores.

The other was the frequency of calls about the failure of otherwise green and good tree limbs.

On the first, just because our trees were overwhelmed with web-spinning critters, does not mean they will die. However, repetitive infestation does weaken a tree.

We have been cutting the webs out and injecting insecticides into trees when the squirmy freeloaders were too high for homeowners to reach. But the first frost is likely not far away, and that will do the trick to get rid of them.

The limb failures seem to have been a byproduct of our unusually hot and dry season. One primary way plants cool themselves is through transpiration of water vapor through the leaf surfaces. During those long, hot days the leaves can give off water faster than the roots can take it up, even when there is plenty of water in the soil. And that may have been one of the culprits, because there was not always plenty of water in our soil.

The other factor is what Kim Coder of the University of Georgia refers to as a "thermal death threshold."

The optimum functioning temperature range for many plants and trees is 70 to 85 degrees. When average temperatures exceed that range for extended periods, trees are damaged.

If sufficient water is not moving through the tissue to cool it, plant temperatures theoretically can soar. This can be one cause of internal fractures and dehydrated tissue, which can precipitate limb failure, even before or just as leaves are wilting.

The good news is that, except for permanently damaged tissue, trees are like people and can be re-hydrated.

Certified arborist Fred Morgan of Cordova has owned and operated Morgan Tree Service since 1974. His column runs in Home & Garden once a month. Get more tree information at morgantreeservice.com.



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