
About Trees: Bradfords susceptible to fire blight infection

By Fred Morgan

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Pear trees are in flower. Unfortunately, a significant number have already or soon will be exhibiting the symptoms of a bacterial disease called fire blight.

This disease can affect plants in the rose family, which includes pears, hawthornes, peaches, crabapples and apple trees.

Bradford pears, a popular landscape and street tree in our area, seem particularly susceptible. Since many of our streets are lined with these pears, you may have already noticed the symptoms without knowing exactly what you were seeing.

The disease takes its name from the physical appearance of the affected twig and leaf tissue, which first may appear water-soaked and then exhibits a brown-to-black, rolled appearance as though it had been scorched with a blowtorch.

The affected tissue carries spores of the disease that are highly infectious. When symptoms appear, it is important to collect and dispose of this material to prevent the spread to other tissue or trees. The ground should be raked of all fallen leaves and/or clumps of leaves, bagged and removed from the property.

Effective treatment for infected trees consists of a three-step process. First, all clumps of blackened tissue on twigs and leaves should be removed from the tree. The pruning cuts must be made at least 6 to 8 inches inside of symptomatic tissue, and pruning tools must be sanitized between each cut with Lysol or a diluted bleach solution.

Second, the tree should be injected with an antibiotic, such as tetracycline, at or near the time of spring flowering. It may be necessary for an arborist to complete this step for you.

Third, avoid application of nitrogen to affected plants. Applying nitrogen to plants with fire blight is like pouring gasoline on a fire.

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