
About Trees: Root rot can devastate mighty oak, surroundings

By Fred Morgan

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A few weeks ago, I traveled to Midtown to look at a venerable old oak snuggled between two equally old houses on Vinton.

The oak had over time done just what old oaks tend to do when close to concrete surfaces. It had been complicit -- maybe even responsible -- for some significant breakage in the old driveway next door.

But the real concern and the reason for my visit was a number of large, ominous-looking, brown-to-black growths around the base of the tree, the part that arborists know as the root collar.

These almost extraterrestrial-looking organisms were actually the reproductive spores, sometimes called fruiting bodies, of a family of persistent root rot called Ganoderma.

In the case of the Vinton oak, it was too late, and the unanimous opinion of several arborists was the tree should be removed. At that stage, there is no "fix" or cure for this aggressive decay. Sub-surface root tissue cannot be grown back.

When these Ganoderma spores make their unwelcome appearance at the base of any oak, they are a legitimate cause of concern and a possible reason for a closer inspection and evaluation of the tree's mechanical stability and safety on the site.

This is especially true when a large tree is close to an occupied structure, streets, sidewalks or any areas people use.

The extent of the tree's circumference affected, as well as the progressive extent of buttress root damage are two criteria for assessing risk. Arborists can do this by several methods, some rather simple and others more sophisticated.

Ganoderma begins as a root-rot disease and so is usually confined to the lower 3 feet of the trunk in its advanced stages. The most common failure point is at the buttress flare, where rot from the bottom up finally allows the entire tree to topple during a rain/wind event or occasionally with no provocation.

The simplest of the initial inspection techniques can be performed by the observant homeowner. All that is needed is a rubber mallet that can be purchased at any hardware store.

Moving around the tree, hit the mallet against the surface of the lower trunk and the flares of large roots that go into the ground around the tree. Solid, healthy wood tissue will produce a flat sound that makes a distinctive contrast with the hollow sound of decayed tissue or voids near the surface of the bark.

Use the good (flat) sound produced up to 4 to 5 feet on a healthy trunk as your index for comparison.

Another important tip for avoiding this problem is to keep dense foliage, such as mature shrubbery, away from the lower trunk to permit air motion, some sunlight and optimal drying after rains or irrigation. Do not let ivy or vines climb up your important trees. Ground cover is for covering the ground, not tree trunks.

If you see such growths on your trees, especially on the western hemisphere of the collar, it may be advisable to consult an expert.

Kicking off the spores may make you feel better but won't inhibit the progress of the damage.



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