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About Trees: Webs mean tree might have mites

By Fred Morgan

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If one morning this month or next you walk outside and see what looks like fine spider webs in your oak or Japanese maple, you may have a problem with the twospotted spider mite.

I have run into several properties this summer that have important oak trees exhibiting moderate infestations of the twospotted spider mite (*Tetranychus urticae*).

These tiny critters, less than 1/50 of an inch long, are more closely related to spiders than to true insects. They are so small that they are difficult to see with the unaided eye.

The twospotted spider mite is a prolific webbing producer, spanning fine silky strands from leaf to leaf and twig to twig. Severe infestations can cover much of a plant's surface with fine webbing. In their early stages, these webs can often be mistaken for the webs of small spiders.

Mites damage plant foliage by a piercing/sucking process. The leaf surface collapses around the insertion point. First comes a yellow spot, followed by a gray or bronze speckled appearance.

The best way to detect their presence (aside from the obvious webbing) is to hold a white card under a branch while slapping the branch surface with your hand. Mites will be dislodged and can be seen crawling around on the card. You can use a pencil to circle suspect spots. If the spots crawl out of your circles, you probably have a mite problem.

Mites thrive and are most destructive in hot, dry conditions. They survive from season to season in the soil or on plant parts. Females can lay up to 20 eggs per day on the leaf surfaces of host plants, and individuals can mature from eggs to adults in as little as five days.

A severe infestation can overtake even large plants (trees) in short order, destroying the leaves, devastating the plant's vitality, sometimes even killing it.

Mites can infest houseplants and small ornamentals, as well as large plants. Adequate irrigation/water availability is an effective deterrent to heavy infestations.

A strong stream of water can sometimes wash populations from the plant. For small jobs, spray a concoction of half water/half rubbing alcohol on the plant.

Biological controls, such as lacewings and lady beetles, can also significantly reduce populations, so some insects can be good to have around.

For large plants or in the case of heavy infestations, a systemic miticide, such as Talstar, Kelthane or Abamectin (Avid or Abacide) may be necessary for adequate control.

Certified arborist Fred Morgan of Cordova owns and operates Morgan Tree Service. Contact him through his Web site, morgantreeservice.com.