

About Trees: Tree looking sickly ? Trenching might help

By Fred Morgan

Friday, August 20, 2010

Important trees can be susceptible to a number of hazards.

There are hundreds of types of insects and almost as many diseases (fungal, bacterial, etc.). But what's wrong when there is no trace of either or so minimal that it doesn't account for the sickly look and condition of a tree?

A tree might appear sparse in its leaf canopy and even begin to die back at the tips of the branches. Yet there might not be clear evidence of debilitating insect problems or fungal root trouble. In many cases like this, the problem is the soil itself.

In the Mid-South, we commonly live with heavy clay soil, which tends to hold water and lack adequate aeration.

It also is prone to compaction, which can impede the growth and function of fibrous non-woody root systems that pick up water and nutrients from the soil.

These problems can occur anywhere, but are most common on new sites, where the topsoil has been scraped away to permit drainage and new trees are planted in a hard, nutrient-deficient subsoil.

During grading, older trees on the site lose their historic topsoil and the roots that are growing in it. Oaks are especially susceptible.

If one can't change out the soil entirely in such a case, the next best thing is a procedure called radial trenching.

Beginning at a point approximately 10-12 feet from the trunk of a large tree, a trench is created approximately 18 inches deep and extending outward and directly away from the trunk and to a point a few feet beyond the ends of the branches, commonly called the dripline. The radial direction of the trenches is crucial to minimizing the damage caused by severing roots.

Use of a trencher may be preferable to hand digging, since the excavated soil will be pulverized to a far greater extent.

Depending on the size of the tree and the soil area to be modified, four to eight of these radial trenches can be created. Enough of this pulverized excavated dirt mixed in a 50-50 ratio with Pro-Mix or some planting soil equivalent should be used to backfill the trench.

The trenches should be tamped moderately as the amended soil goes in, and the leftover soil can be discarded or used elsewhere. In many cases a light sprinkling of Milorganite into the backfill will also be helpful.

In a season or two, the stressed roots of the tree will grow to and cluster at these loose aerated soil trenches. While somewhat labor intensive, radial trenching is usually a one-time prescription and will get a struggling tree over the hump and perked back up.

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