Oak Wilt Q&A for Whispering Oaks

What is Oak Wilt? Ceratocystis fagacearum is a fungal disease that affects the vascular function of Oak trees. It is contagious and can kill some species in just a few months. Many communities in Texas have been ravaged by outbreaks in recent years including the east side of Whispering Oaks.

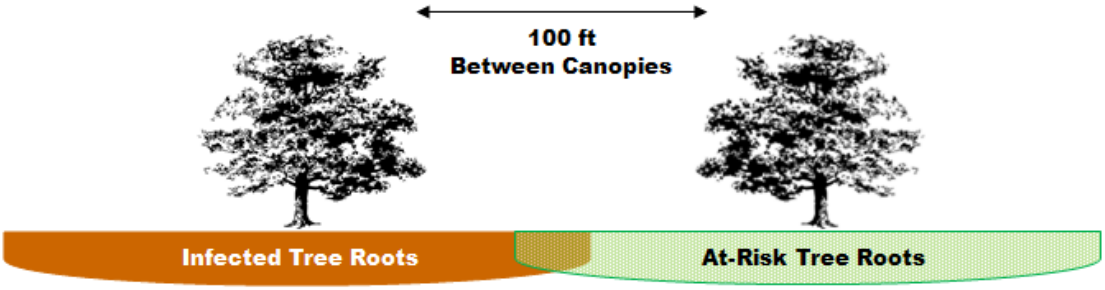
How is it spread? An outbreak often starts via a sap seeking beetle which deposits spores on a fresh wound of a healthy Oak. Careless tree trimmers also spread the disease by failing to effectively sanitize saw blades between job sites. An infected tree then spreads the fungus to nearby Oaks via interconnected root systems up to 100 ft away. Once an outbreak starts it is extremely difficult to contain, particularly in tree dense subdivisions like ours.

Which Oaks are susceptible? All Oaks are vulnerable in varying degrees. The two species of Oaks in Texas (Red and White) are affected differently. Those in the Red grouping are the most susceptible to the disease, often die within weeks and may not respond to treatment once symptomatic. Oaks in the White grouping, including Live Oaks which are prevalent in our subdivision, typically die within a few months but are far more likely to survive with treatment.

How lethal is this threat? Most species of Red Oaks have a 0% survival rate once infected and treatment has a low chance of success. Most species of White Oaks, including Live Oaks, have a 10% survival rate if left untreated, but the survivors are often permanently damaged and disfigured. Other species within the White Oak grouping may have some natural resistance, however this had not been verified and these trees are less common in our subdivision.

Why is the Whispering Oaks outbreak spreading? Total containment of Oak Wilt is difficult in suburban settings where Oaks are plentiful because the fungus is transmitted among interconnected root systems. The disease spreads approximately 75 feet per year.

If the disease hasn't reached my property yet, when should I take action? Because Oak roots can extend 2-3 times the height of the tree, healthy high-value trees within 100 feet of an infected tree merit protective action. Preventative action is critical because symptomatic Oaks have already experienced vascular system damage which inhibits proper circulation of fungicide treatment.



How can I protect my trees from Oak Wilt? Injection of fungicide into the root base is the most scientifically reliable and cost effective prevention. Texas A&M Forest Service endorses Propiconazole which is viscous and requires pressurized application methods. Tebuconazole is a similar but less viscous alternative commonly used in other states. Select local arborists offer this alternative particularly for symptomatic trees. Consulting a specially certified arborist is strongly recommended and *whisperingoaks.org* provides a partial list.

When should treatment be administered? Spring or fall is the best time for a regimen. Slow soaking roots a few weeks beforehand helps ensure the tree is hydrated and receptive. Monitoring nearby threats is critical since allowing a tree to become symptomatic reduces its likelihood of survival.

How long does treatment last? Fungicide injections typically stay active for at least 12 months and should be repeated once within 18 months if a threat remains within a 100 ft radius.

How can I tell if a tree on my property is already infected? Live Oaks typically show yellow or brown veins in their leaves when infection has taken hold. Dry leaf tips and edges may also be a symptom. Species within the Red Oak grouping can be more difficult to detect. Contact a licensed arborist if your Oak's leaves turn dull green or bronze, or appear water-soaked and wilt in the spring. In later stages, leaves curl around the midrib and are shed at branch tips. In the final stages, both green and symptomatic leaves throughout the crown will drop.



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What are treatment options for trees already showing signs of infection? As mentioned above, injection of the fungicide Tebuconazole may be the best strategy for symptomatic trees because its less viscous formula may be absorbed more easily by a tree whose ability to circulate has been compromised. Be advised, if more than 30% of a tree crown is noticeably symptomatic, arborists may discourage attempting to save it.

How much does fungicide treatment cost? Injection cost varies by the size of the tree because larger trees require more fungicide. Pricing is typically determined per diameter inch when measuring the trunk 48" above ground. Timely treatment is almost always far less costly than removal of a dead tree.

Should I treat every Oak? Treating several Oaks can be costly, so property owners may need to determine which are worth saving. Homeowners may prioritize older trees or those that provide a strategic benefit such as dwelling shade or curb appeal. Some property owners intentionally sacrifice less valued Oaks to help alert of the disease's presence within their property.

When should I take action? If your property is at high risk, procrastination can be costly. Periodically look for signs of Oak Wilt nearby, but also talk to your neighbors on all sides since their trees may not show telltale symptoms if treated. The arborists hired by your neighbors often know where the outbreak is headed. If your property is not a near term risk, there is little benefit to pretreatment which may remain effective for only 18 months maximum.

Does fungicide pose a risk to my trees? A small percentage of trees will react negatively to treatment which may result in lasting damage or death. However risk is low particularly among healthy Oaks. Consult a certified arborist for more information.

Can every Oak be saved? While fungicide is the most reliable prevention, it is not effective in all cases, particularly for Oaks which are already symptomatic. Arborists advise that Red Oaks fail unusually quickly.

If my neighbor pre-treated his trees, will this create a buffer zone for mine? No. Even trees that are properly pre-treated with fungicide can still transmit the fungus to nearby Oaks via interconnected root systems. Oaks that have been treated preventatively typically do not show telltale signs of the disease presence and therefore make tracking the disease more difficult.

If I remove an infected tree, is it safe to keep the fire wood? This is discouraged because the fungus can survive on unseasoned cut wood. Never store cut wood from an infected tree near a healthy Oak.

Should I consider removing Oaks as prevention? This is strategy is controversial. Removing healthy trees won't likely slow the inevitable spread of the disease within our community, and it also makes it more difficult to track the outbreak.

Are moss balls a sign of disease? No. Moss balls commonly found on Oaks are not a sign of disease. And their removal, particularly during the high risk February-June period can create wounds which attract the beetles carrying the deadly fungus.

Are there other treatment options? There are alternatives to fungicide, however many are anecdotal. For now, only a fungicide regimen is backed by reputable scientific research and recommended by the experts at Texas A&M Forest Service and similar agencies in other states.

What about trenching? Trenching severs tree roots to inhibit cross contamination. This technique is costly, disruptive and simply not feasible for all sites. Nearly 20 years ago, Whispering Oaks utilized trenching on its east side, and although this effort may have slowed the spread of the disease, full containment was not achieved. Other nearby communities have experienced similar results. Trenching is now rarely recommended by experts.

Why is protecting my Oak trees so important? Trees are an important factor in your property's curb appeal and are the namesake of Whispering Oaks. Experts warn that loss of prominent, mature trees can reduce a property's value by up to 20%. Additionally, the cost of prevention is a fraction of dead tree removal costs. Be advised that City ordinances and WO Community Covenants mandate removal of dead trees for safety reasons.

What else can I do? Plant a variety of trees proactively. Diversity is the key to buffering against diseases which impact select species.

