

# Time Pruning to Avoid Disease

## Black Walnuts

Dr. Jerry Van Sambeek, Forester, U.S. Forest Service (Retired)

The prime season to prune black walnut trees avoids warm temperatures. Routinely pruning during the dormant season can extend well into March and possibly longer, but this dormant period may not be routine. Concluding pruning operations by the end of February is more ideal.

The first line of defense in protecting your trees from disease carrying spores is target pruning which makes use of the branch collar to identify the proper location to remove a branch. Older wood in the union between branch and stem should have already laid down a zone to compartmentalize off the branch wood shielding the tree from fungi. Once the branch is cut any fungi spores in the air that may infest the cut branch would be contained within the branch wood. Unfortunately, not everyone “target prunes”. Flush cut pruning removes this defensive layer and could allow the fungi to grow into the stem creating pathological heartwood.

Target pruning not only helps protect the tree, but you should be able to prune up until a few weeks before budburst on the trees. Budburst on walnut is usually in late April. In years with a warm spring, tree growth will be advanced a few weeks. With these warmer temperatures, it may be prudent to conclude dormant season pruning around the end of February. If the weather turns cold again, you may be able to extend pruning a little longer. Again, the key is doing target pruning versus watching the temperature.

Pathological heartwood has a slightly different color than normal heartwood. A veneer processor might pick up the change in color in the veneer sheets when the trees are harvested. If the fungi get inside the stem, the stem will try to compartmentalize off the center of the bole to restrict fungal growth to the inner rings of sapwood and existing heartwood. With active bleeding, the tree might not be able to compartmentalize the outer edges of the wound. The active flow, however, should be flushing out any fungal spores until bleeding stops and the stem fully compartmentalized the branch off from the stem.

Species like walnut and the birches that bleed badly, the bleeding will continue until the tree bursts bud and new leaves begin transpiring water. Bleeding will not kill the tree but can result in dieback. I believe it would take extensive bleeding from large tree wounds or extensive pruning to cause dieback. If dieback does occur, you could expect some reduction in growth, but this would be difficult to measure accurately. Efforts to stop bleeding are usually not necessary in relation to the time and materials needed.

## Red Oaks

Simeon Wright, Forest Pathologist, Missouri Department of Conservation

As with black walnuts, homeowners and woodland landowners share a common concern about protecting their oak trees from disease following pruning. The risk of oak wilt through pruning wounds occurs when sap feeding beetles pick up the fungus from fungal mats produced under the bark of trees that died previously after oak wilt infection, and carry the spores to fresh

wounds on the oak tree. This primarily occurs in the spring when the fungus produces the fungal mats and the beetles are active. At that time of year (a few weeks before bud break, usually mid-March) until June, you want to avoid wounds on the oaks or use a paint/tree wound dressing immediately on any cuts. Any wounds that are created can potentially be visited by these beetles within a few minutes, however after a few days the wounds are less attractive.

Most of the fungal mats are believed to develop in the spring. There are some reports of fungal mats developing in the fall in the northern states. This is thought to be rare in Missouri. Years ago, it was thought the fungal mats were rarely produced in Missouri even in the spring, however more recent research suggests these fungal mats are more common in the spring than previously thought. There has been no recent research in Missouri on fungal mat production and the potential for oak wilt infection through wounds in the fall.

The importance of target pruning applies to oak as well, but if you want to be extra safe, when active oak wilt occurs nearby, hold off on pruning until temperatures are more consistently below 50 degrees. The Missouri Department of Conservation provides an Oak Wilt guide that provides more details: <http://extension.missouri.edu/treepests/documents/pestalertOakWilt02.pdf>

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