

# OAK WILT

## A Disease of Oak Trees



Department of  
Environmental  
Conservation

### What is oak wilt?

Oak wilt is a disease that affects oak trees. It is caused by *Bretziella fagacearum*, a fungus that develops in the xylem, the water-carrying cells of trees. All oaks are susceptible to the fungus, but the red group oaks (with pointed leaf tips) often die much faster than white group oaks (rounded leaf tips).

### Why is oak wilt a problem?

The oak wilt fungus blocks the flow of water and nutrients from the roots to the crown, causing the leaves to wilt and fall off, usually killing the tree. Red group oaks (scarlet oak, pin oak, black oak, etc.) can die within a few weeks to six months, and the disease spreads quickly from tree to tree. White group oaks (bur oak, swamp white oak, etc.), however, often take years to die and the disease rarely spreads to additional trees.

### Where does it come from?

Oak wilt was first discovered in Wisconsin in 1944, but where it originated is still unknown. It has spread throughout the Midwest and Texas, killing tens of thousands of trees.

### Where has it been found in New York State?

In 2008, a small infection was discovered in Glenville, NY. Despite a quick response to remove and destroy the infected trees, the disease resurfaced in the same location five years later and additional infection sites have been found within a few miles of the original location. Oak wilt has also been discovered in Islip, Riverhead, and Southold in Suffolk County; Brooklyn in Kings County; and Canandaigua and South Bristol in Ontario County.

### How does it spread?

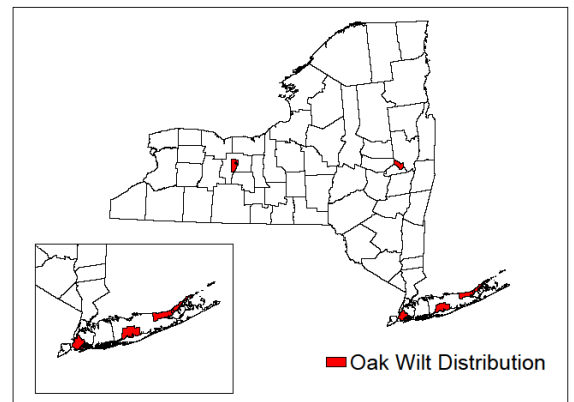
There are two main ways oak wilt is spread: 1) above ground by beetles, and 2) below ground through tree roots.

Fungal spore mats form just under the bark of infected red group oaks after they have died from the disease. During the warmer months, these spore mats emit a sweet odor that attracts sap-feeding beetles and bark beetles, which can pick up fungal spores as they crawl around. The beetles are also highly attracted to fresh tree wounds—such as those caused by pruning. In this way, they spread the fungus from infected trees to healthy trees sometimes miles away. Infected firewood and other wood materials also pose a threat because they can harbor the fungus and/or beetles that can spread the disease.

Spread underground occurs when roots of nearby red group oaks graft to each other (fuse together), creating a connection through which nutrients and the disease can move. In the Midwest, large blocks of red oak forests have died from the disease in a single season due to their vast network of interconnected roots. In contrast, *white* group oaks are much less likely to create root grafts, and spore mats rarely form under their bark, significantly reducing the chance of spread from these trees.



Oak tree killed by oak wilt  
Steven Katovich, USFS, Bugwood.org



■ Oak Wilt Distribution



Root graft  
Ronald F. Billings, Texas A&M Forest  
Service, Bugwood.org

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of oak wilt infection are often very noticeable in red group oaks, but aren't easily seen in white oaks.

- Brown coloration develops on leaves starting at the outer edge and progressing inward toward the mid-vein of the leaf.
- Branch dieback may be visible starting at the top of the tree's canopy and progressing downward.
- Leaves suddenly wilt in the spring and summer and may fall while there is still some green on them.
- Fungal spore mats may develop under the bark of infected trees.



Diseased red oak leaves



Fungal spore mat under bark

## What is being done?

- During the growing season, DEC will take samples from oak trees around the infection sites to look for additional signs of the disease.
  - These areas will continue to be monitored using aerial and ground surveys for at least five years after the last oak wilt detection.
- Established quarantine districts will prohibit the movement of potentially diseased oak wood including firewood.
- DEC is attempting to eradicate the disease in Glenville, Canandaigua, South Bristol and Brooklyn using the following methods:
  - Oak-free zones will be established where infected and surrounding oak trees will be removed.
  - Where possible, trenching will be used to break root connections to lower the chance of spread.
- In Suffolk County, DEC will only attempt to contain the disease due to the number of infection sites and distribution across Long Island. Only infected trees will be removed.



Trenching to break grafted roots

## What can I do?

- Learn to recognize the symptoms of oak wilt including leaf discoloration, rapid leaf loss, and fungal spore mats. If you think your tree is infected with oak wilt, contact DEC (see below).
- Avoid pruning or wounding oak trees in the spring and summer, when spore mats are present and beetles are the most active. If an oak wound occurs during spring or summer, it should be sealed immediately with wound covering. This will slow wound recovery, but also deter beetles from landing on those areas – which will lower the spread of oak wilt.
- Adhere to the NYS firewood regulation which limits untreated firewood movement to no more than 50 miles and obey the rules of the quarantine districts which prevent firewood or oak wood from leaving those areas.
- Visit [www.dec.ny.gov/lands/46919.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/46919.html) for more information.

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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