

# Oak Wilt

## Part 3: Tales of Horror



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David L. Roberts, Ph.D is a Senior Academic Specialist at the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Michigan State University, with B.S. and M.S degrees in Plant Pathology from The Ohio State University and a PhD in Botany and Plant Pathology from Michigan State University. Dr. Roberts was the Director of MSU's Plant & Pest Diagnostic Clinic from 1984-1998. His current position is Senior Academic Specialist in the Deans Office at MSU's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources serving Michigan's Nursery and Landscape Industry.



### INTRODUCTION:

It seems that whenever money is involved, the ugly side of human nature emerges. Following are examples of the dark side of humanity as it relates to Oak Wilt. While we might view these examples as “tales”, they are actual events that have happened in Michigan over the last several years. For some purists, these “tales” might be regarded as anecdotes. Nevertheless, we can learn substantial information about Oak Wilt from these horror stories. For more detailed information on the diagnosis, disease cycle, transmission and management of Oak Wilt, please review ***Oak Wilt Part 1: Symptoms, Biology & Diagnosis*** and ***Oak Wilt Part 2: Prevention & Management Strategies*** in the January/February 2016 and March/April 2016 issues of *The Michigan Landscape*, respectively.

Note: In the following tales, some of the names and places have been changed to protect the innocent... as well as the guilty!

**The Classic Horror Story – PHOTO 1**

Many Michiganders have never heard of Oak Wilt. So, it is not unusual that tree trimmers who have no qualms about oak wilt and who would rather make the fast buck by pruning trees even during the wrong time of year take advantage of the situation. So, a common scenario is that 1-2 months after a pruning event, property owners are surprised, no, actually horrified, to witness the death throes of their beloved trees, as did these property owners on their lake front property near Kalkaska. This is the most common horror story as Oak Wilt is changing Michigan’s landscapes. Incidentally, the “arborist” who did the pruning was moonlighting from one of Michigan’s energy companies.

**Fran Was Frantic! – PHOTO 2**

When her oak tree next to her house began losing leaves (note leaves on the lawn), Fran, who lives near Hartland, became worried. She called in an arborist who told her that the problem was oak wilt and that her tree needed to be removed immediately. Extremely upset with this diagnosis, she called in another arborist who had a completely different diagnosis...then another who had yet a third diagnosis. Now, Fran became frantic. Finally contacting me for assistance, I provided yet a fourth diagnosis of Cynipid Wasp Gall (Inset), which waxes and wanes in cycles from one year to the next. I assured her that nothing needed to be done, which she finally but begrudgingly accepted. The tree is doing fine several years later.

**The Lumber (Robber) Barron – PHOTO 3**

On the shores of Lake Michigan is a property with an accompanying cottage that has been owned by the same extended family for over 100 years. One day, a lumberman stopped by to inform the family matriarch that Oak Wilt was only 10 miles away,... further stating that if she would allow him to harvest the straight-as-an-arrow old growth oaks now, that she could make some money; but if Oak Wilt killed her trees, it would cost her \$4,000 to remove each and every tree. Extremely troubled, the matriarch contacted me. I replied “not to worry”. I alleviated her concern by suggesting that oak wilt may never affect her oak trees, at least not during our lifetime and especially if proper precautions are taken. Furthermore, oak trees that have been killed by Oak Wilt are perfectly fine for timbering.

**Neighbors Without Fences – PHOTO 4**

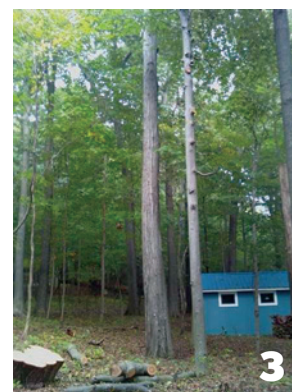
Near Holland, Michigan, Tim has several lovely oak trees in his nicely landscaped property. His neighbor decided that she didn’t like to rake leaves from Tim’s oak trees every fall. So, she decided to have Tim’s large oak adjacent to her property pruned back (Inset) to the property line (Why would this stop the leaf fall? Now we know...the tree died!). Unfortunately, the tree contracted OW when it was pruned that one fine day in May 2016. Oak Wilt now threatens Tim’s other trees as well as others in the neighborhood. While pruning trees to property lines is legal, one does not have the right to kill trees that are someone else’s property. Situations such as these can become litigious as this one is likely to be.

**Neighbors Without Fences Part Dos – PHOTO 5**

Like many of us, Bill considers himself a handyman, reluctant to hire professionals when any man worth his salt can save money by doing things himself. A couple of his trees in his backyard contracted Oak Wilt after he pruned them a few years ago. Since then, Bill has been chasing Oak Wilt all over his Commerce Twp backyard (note dead oak in center). He even rented a two and a half foot trencher (not nearly deep enough) on several occasions to sever the root grafts. During my last visit and attempt to provide him with rational advice, I noticed that he had trenched up to the property line (Inset: faintly visible in the photo’s center); this trench will do nothing to impede the spread of Oak Wilt. While I have noted during my visits that Bill and his neighbor didn’t appear to be on speaking terms, the advance of Oak Wilt into his neighbor’s yard is likely to cause further sparks to fly. Oak Wilt knows no property boundaries.



2



3



4



5



**6A**



**6B**

**The Non-Believer – PHOTO 6**

Lisa couldn't believe her good fortune when a "door knocker arborist" gave her a fantastic deal on pruning her oaks in Highland Twp. In Photo 6A, all trees except one, a neighbor's tree, were pruned and began to shed leaves approximately one to two months after pruning. Lisa and several of her also-affected neighbors eventually had me look at the problem, which I diagnosed as Oak Wilt. Lisa decided that she didn't believe my diagnosis, electing to try some "chanting" around them over the next year or so to try to ensure their survival. Despite Lisa's spiritual efforts, the trees never returned from the dead. Leaving the trees standing for almost two years, the fungus finally transferred via root grafts to the neighbor's lone tree (Photo 6B) when Lisa's trees were finally removed. Lessons learned: 1) Standing trees can be sources of Oak Wilt (Typhoid Mary infections) for other neighbors if left standing into the year following death, and 2) the OW fungus moves through root grafts fairly slowly if diseased trees are not disturbed.

**Scamming the Elderly – PHOTO 7**

In West Bloomfield, an elderly gentleman, Mr.

Nice Guy, owns the condo on the right while Mr. Scammer owns the condo on the left. It seems that Mr. Scammer had previously killed some oaks behind his condo by pruning them (resulting in Oak Wilt). In order to defray his cost of removing the dead oaks, he suggested that Mr. Nice Guy have his tree pruned so that branches would not ruin the roof of his condo. Mr. Scammer's motive was to split the cost of hiring an arborist to remove his dead trees while pruning Mr. Nice Guy's tree....hardly an equitable transaction. Close examination of the photo shows that none of the branches pruned on Mr. Nice Guy's tree were in the direction of his condo's roof. Actually, these trees belong to the Condominium Association and not to the owners. Justice sometimes prevails: Mr. Scammer was severely fined and was forced to assume all of the costs of Oak Wilt remediation at this site. No more Mr. Nice Guy!

**Mr. Deadwood – PHOTO 8**

In Prudenville, on the shores of Houghton Lake, a retired couple lives in their dream lake cottage. A nearby resort had contracted to hire an arborist from Lower Michigan to come north to prune the resort's trees, with further promise of work in the surrounding community. When the arborist arrived to prune the oaks at

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Gail's retirement lakefront dream home, she confronted the arborist stating that she "thought oak trees weren't supposed to be pruned at this time of year" (June). The arborist replied, "Believe me, I've been at this for 30 years, and I know what I'm doing. I'm only taking out the deadwood." Needless to say, every tree the "arborist" deadwooded contracted

Oak Wilt, resulting in catastrophic financial hardship for the retired couple who had never planned on the expensive remediation costs to protect their remaining oaks and their neighbors' oaks. Lesson: Don't deadwood during the prime OW transmission period of Spring unless absolutely necessary (then, immediately paint the wounds).

**The Good Samaritan – PHOTO 9**

Judy, a very kind-hearted woman, didn't think her landscape oak trees needed pruning when an arborist suggested he prune them one nice spring day in 2015. Wanting to help out the arborist, she told him he could prune some of the oaks in the wooded area adjacent to her landscape. Needless to say, all of the trees he



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pruned contracted OW...and they are root-grafted to the valuable trees in Judy's yard (dying tree in center of photo is in the woodlot, just outside the lawn area). Like many others, Judy never budgeted for the extreme and costly measures (trenching & trunk injections) of containing and eradicating Oak Wilt from her property.

**The Painter – PHOTO 10**

While we never recommend the pruning of Oaks during the spring and summer months, when Oak Wilt is most likely to be spread by sap beetles to wounds, we sometimes must perform emergency pruning. During such periods, we recommend that the pruning cuts be painted immediately (sap beetles arrive within minutes after the wound is made); painting should prevent the transmission of the Oak Wilt fungus. Near Grand Haven, Doug hired an arborist to prune his oak trees in the spring of 2015 (Doug asked the arborist to not prune the oak tree left of center in the photo because Doug didn't think it needed pruning). The arborist knew about Oak Wilt, but didn't want to wait until dormancy to prune the trees because he wanted the money now. So, he painted every wound he created (Inset). Yet, all trees he pruned contracted Oak Wilt. Why? He had climbed the trees with spurs, which created sufficient-sized wounds to allow sap



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beetles to transmit the deadly fungus to the trees. All that effort to prevent Oak Wilt and...!!!

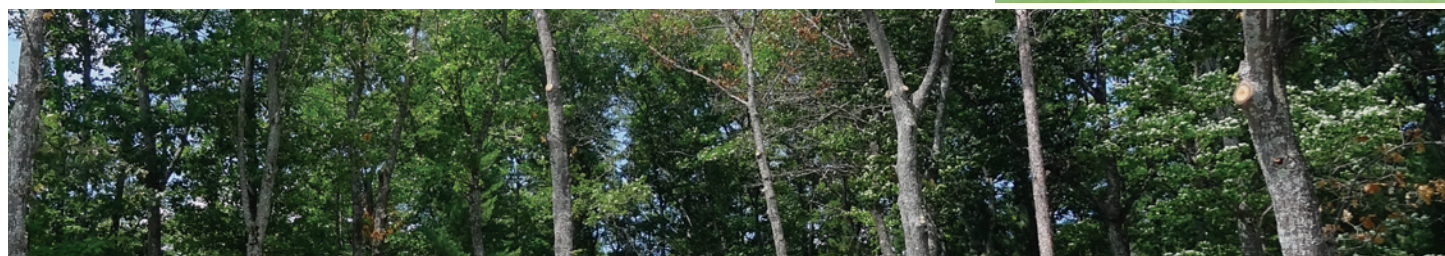
**Storm Damage...to the Rescue**

– PHOTO 11

Any wounding of oaks created during the primary months of sap beetle transmission can result in infection, even with those trees that are storm-damaged. One can visualize the oak wilt fungus moving in this photo from the injured area (left: note tan wilted foliage) towards the main trunk (right: note green, healthy foliage). Prompt removal of this branch would've eradicated Oak Wilt from the tree... but due to the property owners being out of town, the fungus colonized the entire tree and killed it.

**Skullduggery...Gotcha!! – PHOTO 12**

The “arborist” who got the contract to prune these oaks on this golf course in southeast Michigan knew he shouldn’t climb the trees with spurs (an unacceptable practice in modern Arboriculture). Nevertheless, he decided to cut corners and climbed the back side of the trees, hoping no one would notice the wounds. And, no one might have noticed the wounds except for the fact that every tree he pruned became infected with Oak Wilt. Examination of the trees at their funeral revealed the spur marks. Gotcha....even though it makes little difference now.

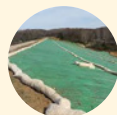


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