

Not every diseased tree can be saved

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Marie Harrison
Thursday, July 17, 2003

One of the most interesting seminars that I attended at a recent Master Gardeners' Conference in Gainesville was taught by Dr. Ed Barnard from the Florida Division of Forestry. The topic of his session was "Tree Diseases: Bane, Boon, or Both?"

Some interesting ideas came out of his presentation. He says that a perfectly healthy, disease-free tree is something of a rarity. Some pathogens live in trees and on bark and leaf tissues at all times. They become operative only after a stimulus mobilizes them. Old age, severe weather events, fire, insect activity, or manipulations by man are outside forces that may cause native pathogens to respond. Usually, however, the tree and its pathogens coexist peacefully.

True, some pathogens cause the loss of entire species of trees, such as Dutch elm disease and chestnut blight. Dr. Barnard noted, however that these two diseases were imported into our country where no natural defenses existed. They swept through forests of trees and decimated them because there was no natural control.

To answer the question of whether tree diseases are bane, boon, or both, Dr. Barnard concluded that it all depended. Tree diseases have to be evaluated in context. What is good for one situation might be bad for another. He mentioned specifically the heart rot in old pines that creates nesting habitat for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Is that good or bad? Many examples were given, and we began to see that many diseases we consider bad are in fact part of nature. "Why," Dr. Barnard questioned, "do we feel a need to control tree diseases that are natural, cyclic, sometimes beneficial, and often senescence-related?"

Dr. Barnard pointed out that by the time the homeowner notices that a tree is in trouble it is probably too late to do anything about it. Often the problem is the result of stresses placed on the tree by the homeowner. Weed-and-feed fertilizer, for example, is regularly put on grass that grows underneath trees, though the directions plainly state that the product should not be distributed in the root zone of trees. Tree roots are damaged during construction. Mulch may be piled up against a trunk causing it to rot. Instances have been seen where an entire tree was girdled by string trimmers or severely damaged by lawn mowers or other mechanical devices. Then the homeowner wonders why the tree dies?

Finally, Dr. Barnard observed, we don't seem to want our trees to grow old. Often a tree's problem is simply that it has lived its allotted number of years and its life span is finished.

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In such instances nothing can be done that will make any difference.

We were cautioned not to fall victim to "tree experts" peddling quick fixes for sick trees. Usually their recommendations neither are quick nor do they fix the problem. He also pointed out that an entire industry has sprung up that is willing to sell any number of sprays and chemicals for sick trees. For them, tree diseases are definitely a boon. Some tree diseases do not need to be controlled, and others are simply beyond our control.

The overriding principle is that we should live with our trees and treat them with respect. Plant them correctly and use proven beneficial cultural practices, such as mulching correctly, watering during drought, correct pruning when necessary, and calling in a forester or arborists when problems occur that we feel unequipped to handle. Plant trees that are suited to our climate and to the site, and think carefully before deciding to try to save a tree that seems badly diseased.

With good cultural practices and no unseemly acts of nature beyond our control, our trees should last their natural lifetime.

Marie Harrison is a Master Gardener Volunteer with the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Okaloosa County. She is a member of the Board of Directors for the Florida Federation of Garden Clubs, and an Accredited Flower Show Judge and Floral Design Instructor. Her book, Gardening in the Coastal South, is now available in local bookstores