

## Wait to Worry about Sudden Oak Death



*Photo provided by Plant Management Network: Vascular discoloration of Rhododendron by the fungus that causes sudden oak death, *Phytophthora ramorum*.*

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You've probably heard or read a little about sudden oak death (SOD) in the news recently. Is there a possibility you could have SOD in your home landscape? Not likely. From what we know so far of the disease, it's very unlikely that any north Florida landscape would have a case of SOD at this point.

My brother recently told me about a sermon he heard with the theme, "Wait to Worry", urging the listeners not to worry about things prematurely. I would encourage home gardeners to consider this new plant disease in that perspective. At this point, let the authorities and the nurseries do the worrying.

So far SOD, which can infect a number of types of woody plants, has only been found on a very few individual nursery plants in Florida . All of these plants came from one wholesale nursery in Azusa , California . Florida Department of Agriculture (FDACS) acted quickly to stop plant shipments from California into Florida following the news that SOD had been found in the California nursery. FDACS also stopped sales in Florida retail nurseries of plants that had already come from the California nursery where the disease was found as well as from other locations owned by that California nursery chain.

Plant samples were taken from the retail nurseries in Florida that were customers of the Azusa , California grower, Monrovia Growers. Only samples from three Florida nurseries have tested positive for *Phytophthora ramorum*, the fungus that causes SOD. Two plants were found at one retail nursery in Tallahassee and those individual plants, and a generous buffer of plants around them at the nursery, were destroyed offsite by burial six feet below ground.

While SOD may have the potential to be a very serious landscape plant disease in our area, at this point we, as gardeners, need to remain calm. Even though SOD has been found on these three nursery plant samples in Florida , the disease has not been found anywhere in a landscape situation outside of California and Oregon .

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Experts don't even know if the disease could thrive and spread in our climate. The pathogen appears to have a strict requirement for cool, moist environmental conditions for successful infection. Many unanswered questions remain about this disease. The attitude of FDACS and the cooperating nurseries at this point has been one of extreme caution and "better safe than sorry". Though it has been a financial strain on all nurseries involved, FDACS has been most complimentary of the cooperation the nurseries are giving in stopping the potential spread of this disease and safeguarding our landscapes.

Should you stop buying plants from nurseries during this time because of the possibility of buying a plant with SOD? My advice to gardeners is to continue life as normal. The authorities and the nurseries are doing everything possible to safeguard us right now. At the time I'm writing this, nurseries still can't sell any of their plants from Monrovia Growers. Plant inspectors, and nursery managers alike, are keeping an extremely close eye on the Monrovia plants in the retail nurseries for any more symptoms of the disease. No one wants this disease to get out. So you can feel fairly confident that plants you do buy at a nursery right now have been under much more scrutiny than in normal times. Hopefully, before too much longer, the Monrovia plants in the retail nurseries will prove to be disease-free and can be offered for sale again. And, hopefully, Monrovia will be able to resume shipping plants to us again soon.

Meanwhile, don't jump to the conclusion that every spot you see on your oaks, camellias, or other woody plant in your landscape is from SOD. The chances of this fungus having already escaped into our landscapes and infected your plants are very, very slim. Still, if you want to worry, the University of Florida has published fact sheet PP197, "Sudden Oak Death", which covers symptoms and biology of the disease. It's available online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/PP118>

To get even more details, visit FDAC's website at [www.doacs.state.fl.us/pi/enpp/pathology/sudoakdeath.html](http://www.doacs.state.fl.us/pi/enpp/pathology/sudoakdeath.html)

If, after learning about the disease and looking at the photos of the symptoms, you really think you may have a case of SOD, you can contact the the FDACS toll-free helpline at (888) 397-1517. If you recently bought a Monrovia Growers plant (their name is printed on each pot and tag with the pot), consumers are asked not to remove the plants from your yard or return them to the retail nursery where you bought them. If you think the plant has SOD symptoms, instead contact the helpline for additional assistance.

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