

# Oak Pruning Consideration

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It's that time of year again...the daffodils and crocuses are breaking through the winter-matted leaves and certain spring indicator species' tree buds throughout our state are swelling up, preparing for budbreak.

Spring in North Carolina is quick to come and quick to fade during these modern climate-influenced seasonal patterns and the appropriate windows for opportunities in tree care are becoming narrower. As a good general rule of thumb, a lot of arborists agree that pruning most trees during the dormant season is preferred to pruning applications that take place during the growing season. Overall stress and other issues can arise when trees are pruned outside of their "window". This general rule-of-thumb comes with exceptions and limits for different species. In fact, for spring flowering species, it is preferred to prune immediately following the end of the flowering cycle and for summer flowering species, it is usually preferred to prune during dormancy. These preferences are not exact and each species, condition, location, and individual characteristics should be considered before any pruning application.

One of the most common and often overlooked 'windows' for pruning has a lot more serious consequences than others and also happens to be for one of our most widespread and stately species groups, the oaks. Oak trees line the downtown streets from Wilmington to Waynesville, hold mountains up Asheville, and are so dominant in Raleigh that we call it Oak City. Oaks are classified into two family subsets, red oaks and white oaks, and maintain similar conditional requirements throughout our state.

With great power in numbers comes great responsibility of maintenance in our urban and wildland forests for these oaks and one of their biggest threats comes in the form of a vascular wilt fungus called *Ceratocystis fagacearum*, or commonly referred to as oak wilt. One of the most preventable ways to stop the spread of this disease, which can very quickly kill red oaks and take many thriving years away from white oaks, is to prune oaks within the appropriate time window. One way oak wilt has been found to spread is through spores of the fungi adhering to the bodies of beetles in the Nitidulidae family which are deposited into fresh pruning cuts when they feed. The beetles are attracted to the sweet stink of fungal mats in existing oak wilt-infected trees and come to feed. They load up on spores and move to the next opportunity, which is often fresh pruning cuts made at the wrong time of year. The spores infect the vascular system and the disease spreads quickly and decline can be seen the following season.

To help prevent the spread of this disease, Arborists typically do not prune oak trees between mid-April and August, however, as we are experiencing more volatility in our seasonal climate patterns, it may be time to close our window a little more to ward off this terrible disease. I think

we should consider limiting the pruning of oaks in NC from April 1 until the leaves drop unless absolutely necessary and if that's the situation, a program for health recovery should be instituted and the tree should be monitored. Spread the word, not the disease!



*Photo courtesy Texas A&M*

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