

DOES SPRAYING HELP HARD-HIT ELM TREES?

By Ellen Foley

The stately old elm in the back yard is bigger and taller than when you were a kid. It's different in another way, too. On one limb the leaves turned brown and fell off in midsummer. You suspect it's Dutch elm disease.

The blight, which arrived in the United States on a shipload of logs from Europe in the 1920s, still is running its course. Because of it, the elm soon will be as rare as the chestnut tree, which was devastated by an earlier blight.

There is not one best program to save your elms. The ideal program has several components.

One basic is a spring (usually April) preleaf spraying with methoxychlor, a successor to DDT, which doesn't accumulate in fish or fatty animal tissues as DDT did. This chemical attacks the European bark beetle when it leaves its larval state in dead and diseased bark where it was spawned, and flies to twig crotches of healthy trees to feed, carrying Dutch elm fungus along with it.

Some companies prefer to spray a tree with benamyl, just after the foliage has sprouted. Others suggest both methoxychlor and benamyl applications. The benamyl is absorbed by the leaves and into the tree's system where it fights fungus. It usually is applied in late May and June, just before the tree reaches full leaf.

Some companies suggest injecting benamyl into the tree as another option, but they admit this technique has not yet been totally perfected.

"We don't recommend injection," said Frank Laemmlin, a Michigan State University plant pathologist. "We are not satisfied that it is that much more effective than spraying, and the damage you can do by injecting the tree can be pretty severe sometimes ... if it hasn't been done properly."

Another chemical used, if you have two or more trees to be concerned about, is valpam. This is used to sever root systems of adjacent elm trees, which sometimes can become emeshed.

Dutch elm disease can be passed on from one tree to another thru root systems. The problem with valpam is that it burns up the grass and shrubbery in the area where it is applied. Tree experts warn you to beware of quack cures, which are as rampant for elm trees as they have been for cancer patients.

If someone tries to sell you a benamyl treatment for \$10, don't take it, one tree service company warns. The raw material is more expensive than that, and you'll be getting less than your money's worth and may lose the tree.

Company estimates of April applications for methoxychlor on one good-sized tree are in the \$20 to \$25 range; and an additional application of benamyl in June would be about \$35. These would become annual upkeep costs if you choose to keep your elm.

Trimming a tree could cost from \$50 to \$200, and cutting one down \$150 to \$600 to \$1,000. The price variation depends on where the tree is located.

Picking a tree service company you can trust is a must if you are going to try to save your elm tree or save your property while you're having it removed. Tree companies make the following suggestions:

- Get recommendations from friends or the officials in your city who subcontract with these companies for spraying and tree removal.

- If you see a company working in your neighborhood, examine its work and check to see if the workers have mucked up the lawn or pulverized the pavement.

- Be sure the firm is licensed and insured. Reputable firms will have their insurance agents send you a certificate of insurance if you pick them to work for you. Don't let them start without it, so you can be sure any damage they might do to your property will be covered.

- Some companies recommend you ask if they are staffed with tree surgeons and graduate foresters to be sure you get an honest, tree-oriented opinion.

- Find out if the tree company sends periodic notice that your tree needs attention.

- See if your neighbors are interested in finding tree service for the whole block. They might be cheaper. If you give a company a block of work to do, you might be able to get block prices.

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