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## Resistant red oak seedlings isolated

Resistance to oak wilt disease, for the first time, has been observed in red oak seedlings. The screening procedure, which scientists developed and used to identify the resistant seedlings, may insure that red oaks remain prominent in the eastern half of the nation, providing beauty and shade in urban and rural settings. But science has yet to find a way to insure that the species remains as an important hardwood lumber tree.

Scientists of USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) at Madison, Wis., and their colleagues at the University of Wisconsin, screened more than a thousand seedlings from which they found 17 that were resistant.

"These seedlings developed no oak wilt symptoms after we used a hypodermic needle to inoculate them with the fungal-disease causing organism in 3 successive years," said ARS plant pathologist Richard D. Durbin.

Further research is being conducted to find whether the seedlings may still succumb to infections by natural agents such as beetle.

Efforts to identify resistant red oaks in nature are hampered because exacting conditions necessary for disease spread may not be present at many times, says Dr. Durbin. The preliminary screening procedure makes testing of large numbers of seedlings possible in the greenhouse.

"If the promising results of our screening are further confirmed, resistant red oaks could be multiplied in sufficient numbers for the nursery trade within a few years," says Dr. Durbin. But some basic stumbling blocks must be overcome before they can be increased in large numbers.

In their search for ways to mass produce the disease-resistant red oak, the scientists are trying to develop several vegetative techniques including tissue culturing and rooting. "Reproducing the red oak sexually is not a viable alternative," says Dr. Durbin, "because we would have to wait 30 to 40 years for the trees to develop sexual maturity." Genetically, red oak trees are so complex or heterogeneous that many of the offspring would not be resistant anyway.

New techniques for vegetatively propagating the resistant oaks — if they can be developed soon — will be most timely. Dr. Durbin notes that oak wilt has spread alarmingly during the past three decades in eastern and central states where oaks are the leading hardwood timber species and important as shade trees. Some researchers have predicted that within the next 30 years about half of the nation's oak trees will be afflicted. □

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