

NEWS RELEASE
November 14, 2002

DECAY IN LANDSCAPE TREES

BACKYARD HORTICULTURE

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Along with our recent storms in Mariposa, falling trees and branches have caused concerns. In some cases, improper pruning or a lack of pruning, have made trees more susceptible to problems. In older trees, decay and rot may be the cause. Even the manner of irrigation can affect the health of our landscape trees. If watered too frequently or too close to the trunk of the tree, decay organisms have a better chance of invading the tree.

Wood decay in landscape trees is a concern for both tree health and safety reasons. Trees infected with decaying fungi may become weakened or die as the fungus grows through them, using the tree as its food source. Decayed branches, trunks or whole trees may break and fall. With some root and stem decaying fungi, large portions of the roots or stems may be decayed before visible symptoms appear on the foliage, leading to a potentially dangerous condition.

The fruiting body or sporophore of a decay fungus is an important sign of an existing infection. Sporophores are sometimes called conks, brackets, basidiocarps or mushrooms. They may be present in the soil above roots, at the base of a tree or on trunks and branches. They are most commonly seen in fall and sometimes in late spring. The presence of sporophores usually indicates a potentially serious problem. However, extensive decay may occur without their appearance.

Different species of wood decay fungi can cause different problems in trees. Some are saprophytic, feeding only on already dead tissue, while others are pathogenic, feeding on living

tissue. Two types of decay are called white rot and brown rot. White rots degrade all major components of the wood, including lignin. The decayed wood is soft, moist and usually light colored. In brown rots, lignin is left unchanged, resulting in wood that is brown, dry and crumbly.

Most wood decay fungi infect through bark wounds from airborne spores. Injury prevention is therefore the primary method of control. Also, trees that are weakened by drought, overwatering, soil compaction or other factors are more susceptible to infection. Chemical treatments of infected trees are usually not effective in eliminating the fungus. The best prevention is to prune properly and irrigate thoroughly but infrequently.

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