

Save stately oaks by watching for 'wetwood'

By RUTH MOORE

These are the times that try (gardeners') souls! Each year the weather seems to outdo itself in adventuring with new and capricious weather patterns. This year Pluvius has outdone himself, bringing us one of the wettest or driest, coldest or hottest planting seasons for many years.

Not only were many gardeners unable to get their cool weather vegetable seed and plants in the garden (unless they took advantage of the few days in late February when the ground was in suitable condition), but the alternate spells of dry weather or constant rain and thunderstorms caused many seeds to rot in the ground.

Even more disastrous, the variable dry, hot days and days — almost weeks — of constant rain, have wrought havoc among our magnificent hardwood trees — especially mature white oaks.

Several callers have reported that their beautiful oak trees are afflicted with some kind of disease; others blame the damage on insects they find clustered around wet, damagad bark. Indeed, all authorities in the field of dendrology with whom I have consulted agree that it is almost epidemic among our deciduous hardwoods, chiefly the oaks, but also some maples, elms, poplar and sycamore trees.

The affliction is an infection by the bacterium, *Erwinia nematocaulis* (don't try to remember it), according to Joe Hall, Anderson County Extension Agent. It enters the tree through cracks in the bark, somewhat like bacteria enter our human system when the skin is punctured or broken.

When first I saw such an injured oak, the lesions looked like a canker, swollen and disfigured; giant sores at the base of the tree. Each "sore" was alive with yellow jackets and other small insects. But it was not they who were inflicting the damage; the insects were flocking to the tree to partake of the apparently sweet viscous liquid oozing from the afflicted tree trunk.



Kisha checks out the antibiotic treatment, while her owner, Iris Lay, looks on and hopes for the best results.

This condition is not one to trust to amateurs. When Iris Lay of Clinton spotted two of her many splendid old white oaks displaying these symptoms, she called Cortese (cor-tay'-sa) Tree Specialists in Knoxville, members of the National Arborist Association. Jim Cortese also diagnosed the trouble as being the "wetwood" disease. He encircled the base of the trees with small white vials of antibiotics.

John B. Sharp, University of Tennessee extension forestry specialist, says that this disease most often occurs in shady places. He does not recommend any specific treatment, except chiselling out the damaged tissue thoroughly and letting the area dry, then washing the wounds with a multipurpose fungicide, and applying a tree wound dressing.

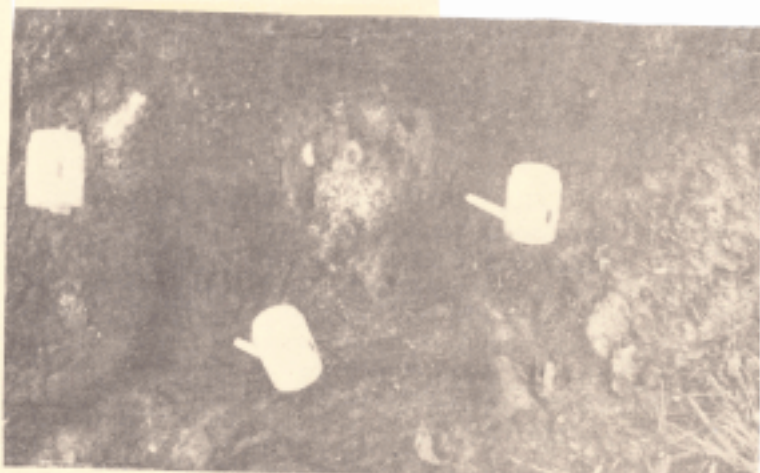
Sharp concludes, "If wetwood is allowed to persist, it may spread so extensively that it girdles the tree. Affected trees should be treated and fertilized to improve general vigor of the tree."

Joe Hall has had many calls about stricken oaks, with symptoms sounding much like the wetwood disease. He says the extremes of weather can cause stress in the trees, with internal sap pressure. Yeast and bacteria invade, seep out in cracks in the

bark and flow down in a "slime flux".

Hall recommends drilling holes in the bark to relieve the pressure, with a pipe in a drain hole and container to collect the flux.

Apparently all authorities agree on the cause being extremes of dry and wet weather. If, however, the wetwood disease is allowed to persist and spread through the tree, it can kill the cambium layer and eventually the tree, so, do SOMETHING! As for the treatment, why not try all three methods for triple insurance?



These eruptions of "wetwood disease" can kill a tree if not treated promptly. The light spots on the trunk of the tree at the base indicate the disease.