

OUTDOORS

MINNESOTA DNR

What about bur oak blight?

BY JANA ALBERS
DNR forest health specialist

What about bur oak blight? Bur oak blight is a native fungal disease that becomes very noticeable on leaves and twigs in late August and September. This outbreak is related to the cool, wet and prolonged spring weather similar to the weather in the upper Midwest over the past few years.

This disease can sneak up on you. A healthy-looking bur oak in July may suddenly be full of infected and dying leaves in August or September. First you'll see wedge-shaped brown areas on the ends of leaves. As the disease progresses, those leaves turn brown, die and then shrivel. Most of the infected leaves will remain attached to the twigs for several months; some will remain on the tree

all winter. A healthy bur oak will shed all its leaves in the fall. To determine if a tree has bur oak blight, look for dark brown, dead and crispy leaves on the lower stem and lower branches this fall, winter and next spring. They look quite dead, but wait for buds to open next spring before cutting down the tree or removing branches as most bur oaks will not suffer nega-

tive consequences from these annual infections. Only a tiny proportion of infected tress will lose vigor over a period of years, be attacked by secondary insects and die. Some trees will be seriously affected while adjacent trees appear healthy. This is likely due to the variation in the resistance of individual bur oaks to this disease.

The "oliviformis" variety of bur oaks can be seriously infected. This bur oak variety grew on oak savannas before European settlement and produces small diameter acorns that are olive-shaped. Other varieties of bur oak that grow in dense or bottomland forests are less seriously affected. Their acorns are rounder, fatter and larger than their cousin's olive-shaped acorns.

Since this disease is weather related and only seriously affects a small proportion of bur oaks, you do not need to control it in the forest. In contrast, high-value bur oaks can be treated by fungicide injection in the spring. Because the fungus overwinters on the tree, removing fallen leaves is not an effective management tool.

Any infected bur oak that does not leaf out next year is likely suffering from an infestation of two-lined chestnut borers. These trees



WELBY SMITH, MN DNR

Bur oak acorns.



JANA ALBERS, MN DNR

Late summer leaves.

should be cut down and either burned or hauled to a tree disposal site in your county before April 1. Do not use these oaks for commercial firewood. Firewood from oaks that died last year can contain living two-lined chestnut borers that will emerge in the next spring and

infest red, white and bur oaks growing nearby. For more information on bur oak blight, visit: www.na.fs.fed.us/pubs/palerts/bur_oak_blight/bob_print.pdf or www.myminnesotawoods.umn.edu/2010/09/bur-oak-blight-bob-in-minnesota/

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