

Sick Tree? It may not be as bad as you think...

By Deborah Goard
University of New Hampshire
Cooperative Extension

(Editor's note: The Granite State Sentinel will be occasionally running articles submitted by the UNH Cooperative Extension. This is the first in that series.)

The trees around your home and street often hold a special meaning to you and your family. They add character to the neighborhood, your great-grandparent may have planted it when the house was originally built, or it may be the only tree in the yard. Unfortunately, these trees, like people, are subject to sickness and injury throughout their lives.

Over the course of the changing seasons, some leaves get holes or black spots on them and needles may turn brown and drop. Entire branches may die and fall off, and trunks become new hangouts for woodpeckers. These sights tend to have you wondering what might be wrong with your tree.

There are several different fungi, bugs and environmental factors that can cause problems. Many are only cosmetic and won't affect the health of the tree. For instance, tar spot on maples, a fungus that makes black raised bumps that looks as though someone put tar drops on the leaves, doesn't harm the tree other than making it aesthetically unpleasant.

Native insect problems are cyclical, as populations come and go. There may be heavy damage on the tree for a year or two, before the insect population is



Tar spot on maple leaf (Courtesy photo)

again reduced in numbers. Trees usually bounce back from this as long as it isn't an annual occurrence over several years.

Mechanical injury such as a weed whacker that gets too close to the trunk may heal over on a healthy tree although it can leave the tree more prone to other problems.

The timing of the damage is also relevant to the survival of a tree. Damage to leaves is more detrimental to the plant when it occurs in the spring than if it occurs in late summer or fall. An example is the heavy frost we had this spring after most of the leaves were out, causing deciduous tree leaves to blacken and shrivel.

When something like this happens so early in the growing season, the tree uses its extra food reserves to put out new leaves for the year. If this were to happen over multiple years, the trees will become weaker and more susceptible to disease or injury that may occur.

On the other hand, an insect

such as the fall webworm defoliates trees in the fall after the trees have done most of their growing and leaves are about to fall off anyway. In this case, the tree looks a lot worse off than it is and should be fine once spring comes around again.

If you suspect a problem with your tree, it's best to first identify the problem to make sure the right treatment is used. UNH Cooperative Extension's Plant Diagnostic Lab (<http://extension.unh.edu/Agric/AGPDTS/PlantH.htm>) helps identify plant pathogens, stress-related disorders and pests. What should you do once the problem has been identified? It depends on the cause, how easy the problem is to fix and ultimately, how much you as the owner, value the tree.

Some problems may be very easy to fix, such as knocking off tent caterpillars with a broom handle and stomping on them. Other problems such as needlecast may require treatment from a professional with a New

Cheney Announces Strafford County

DOVER—

Catherine Cheney (R), a third-term City Councilor, filed with the Secretary of State to run for Strafford County Commissioner and announced her candidacy at Calef's Country Store in Barrington on July 15th. Introducing and endorsing Catherine was Former Strafford County

Hampshire pesticide applicator's license. When treatment isn't available or the tree is heavily damaged year after year and is dying, sometimes the best decision is to cut the tree down.

If the tree is removed and you want to plant another in its place, make sure you choose a tree that's right for the site conditions so the tree has the best chance of survival. Consider if the soil is too wet or too dry, if there is a lot of sun or if the tree will be planted near a road heavily salted in winter. If the previous tree was infected by a disease that stays in the soil, choose a tree species the disease doesn't affect.

There are many things that can cause sickness and damage to trees. For those trees that are of special importance, an annual inspection and proper care can go a long way to maintaining the health of the tree and making it more likely it will outlive its owner.

Deborah Goard is the Strafford County UNH Cooperative Extension Educator, Forest Resources. She can be reached at 603-749-4445 or deborah.goard@unh.edu.