

Emerald Ash Borer and Your Trees

By Diana Alfuth, UW-Extension Horticulture Educator

Emerald Ash Borer has had a devastating effect on ash trees in certain parts of the country. How you deal with the ash trees in your yard depends on where you live, and fortunately, Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) has not yet been found in the Pierce, Polk and St. Croix county area. Current research shows that treatment for EAB is not warranted unless the insect has been confirmed within 15 miles of your particular tree.

Emerald Ash borer is a metallic green beetle about a half inch long and quite thin. It lays its eggs on the bark of Ash trees in about mid-July, where they hatch into small cream-colored larva. The larvae burrow under the bark and feed on the tissues under the bark, creating meandering S-shaped tunnels until early spring, when they pupate underneath the bark. In mid-May to early June, the new adult chews a 3/16-inch D-shaped hole through the bark and emerges to mate and lay eggs.

The tunnels under the bark are what do the damage, as they effectively break the connection between the roots and the top of the tree. Over time, this causes dieback and eventually death. General symptoms of a tree infested with Emerald Ash Borer include canopy thinning, usually starting in the upper portion of the tree, sprouts of new branches/leaves along the trunk, bark splitting, and woodpecker damage (as the woodpeckers eat the insect larvae). These symptoms, however, can also be caused by other insects or disease. Specific symptoms for EAB would include the S-shaped tunnels under the bark, the presence of cream-colored 1 ½-inch larvae, and D-shaped exit holes approximately 3/16 inch wide. Note that there are other boring insects that also make holes in the bark, but they are usually round or oval, not D-shaped.

EAB has been found near La Crosse and in southeastern Wisconsin, as well as Winona and St. Paul in Minnesota—all well beyond 15-miles from Pierce, Polk and St. Croix counties. Counties where EAB is confirmed are put under quarantine, which restricts the treatment and transportation of the wood. The Wisconsin and Minnesota Departments of Agriculture keep track of EAB infestations in their respective states, and updated maps of where the insect has been found are on their websites.

Because EAB has not yet been found locally, homeowners should not be routinely treating ash trees in their yard with insecticides. If the tree is showing symptoms of dieback or poor health, it is not necessarily caused by EAB and a proper diagnosis should be made to determine the correct treatment approach. Most cases of tree dieback in our area are the result of tree stress, often caused by a previous drought period which may have outright caused dieback or allowed other insects or diseases to take hold. Damage to the trunk or root system is also a common cause of dieback symptoms.

The good news is that the available treatments are very effective. If a tree does get attacked by EAB, it often takes 4-5 years for the tree to die, and it can still be saved by insecticide treatments up until about 50% of the canopy has died.

If and when EAB does arrive in the area, homeowners will have to consider the value of a particular ash tree in their yard in relation to insecticide treatment costs. A high-quality tree in an important area of the landscape may warrant treatment. There are treatments that can be made by homeowners, usually involving a soil drench where the insecticide is poured over the root zone near the base of the tree and absorbed up to where the larvae are feeding. For larger trees, hiring a certified arborist may be necessary as these professionals have access to specialized application equipment and additional

insecticides not available to homeowners. But again, until EAB is found within 15 miles of your tree, treating for EAB is not warranted.

Hopefully, EAB will take a long time to make its way to our area. Because it moves mostly by people transporting firewood, be sure you don't move any wood products where EAB or other invasive insects could be present.

If you have questions about your ash tree or have found an insect you think might be Emerald Ash Borer, you can contact Diana Alfuth at the Pierce County UW-Extension office, 715-273-6781 for diagnosis or identification.