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Emerald ash borer leaves deadly trail



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Herald & Review photos, Lisa Morrison

Arborjet technical manager Jeff Palmer measures the circumference of the ash tree at the home of Kelly and Debby Jowry in Clinton. At 85 inches around, it is one of the the largest ash trees in the state and is being treated to resist the emerald ash borer threat.

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DECATUR – Deep within the ash trees of Central Illinois, tiny green insects are feasting, carving loopy pathways beneath the outer layer of bark.

The voracious appetites of these invasive species destroy the trees that host them. Smaller than a thumbprint, they have felled millions of ash trees since they were discovered in Michigan in 2002.

They are always hungry.

Emerald ash borer, a species native to Asia, was discovered in Macon County in 2012. The insects' inevitable trail of devastation is beginning to show this year, said city forester Randy Callison.

“It's bad and getting worse,” he said.

There are about 1,200 ash trees on city boulevards, he said. Once a popular municipal tree because of their resilience, the ash trees now suffer from a lack of natural predators for the invasive pest that is killing them.

About a third of the city's ash trees appear to be in various stages of death and will need to be removed, likely this fall and winter when city crews aren't so busy mowing.

Once the trees are hauled away, however, there is no money in the city's budget to replace them. Callison said residents or community groups interested in planting and maintaining a tree on a public right of way may do so, but should contact him first at (217) 875-4820.

Signs that a tree has been infested with emerald ash borer include the dieback of canopy branches and small D-shaped holes in the bark. The tree might also sprout small branches lower on its trunk in an ultimately futile attempt to save itself.

Once the insects reach the tree, they begin to devour its insides, cutting off the food supply over a period of years.

For trees that are currently healthy, the opportunity for treatment remains.

Homeowners can purchase systemic insecticides and apply them to the soil around the tree. Injectable insecticides are also an option, but must be applied by a professional.

In either case, the treatment must be applied every year or two, depending on the product.

The commitment was worth it for Kelly and Debby Howry of Clinton, who own the state's largest green ash tree.

At 85 inches around and more than 90 feet tall, the tree is so massive that it keeps the Howrys' home cool. They rarely turn on the air conditioning unless the weather is especially humid.

"I wouldn't cut it down unless I had to," said Kelly Howry, who has lived in the home since 1980.

Two years ago, the Howrys sought professional help to protect the majestic tree.

Arborjet, a company specializing in tree injection, supplied the chemicals for the project. Jeff Palmer, a technical manager with the company, worked with arborist Dan Coffin of Mahomet to apply the product, a process that takes several hours.

Their work in July 2013 was apparently effective. When they returned to reapply the product this week, the tree was showing no signs of an infestation.

"We would probably see some woodpecker activity in the upper canopy of the tree. Certainly two years from now, the tree would be pretty much dead," Palmer said. "They really are attracted to these large trees. Obviously it's going to take a lot of insects to kill it, but they would swarm on it."

To apply the product, which is called TREE-age, Palmer and Coffin drilled 32 holes around the trunk of the tree. They hooked up tubes, like a flurry of IVs, and pumped the chemical into the tree, which rather quickly took its medicine.

Coffin, of Heartwood Tree & Landscape Solutions, said he's treated about 200 ash trees over the past three years to guard against the insect. He donated his time to the Howrys.

Coffin said he knows the treatment works because he's watched its effect over the years on a tree near his house. He convinced the homeowner to allow him to treat one of the three ash trees in the yard.

"Now his other two trees are dead, his neighbor's trees are all dead but his tree in his backyard is beautiful – healthy, green, vigorous," Coffin said.

While the city of Decatur elected not to treat its trees, Callison did treat one in his yard and said it remains healthy. He encouraged anyone with questions about treating their trees to give him a call.

"If they don't (treat the tree) now, then it's kind of like the old commercial – 'pay me now or pay me later,'" he said. "Either do it now, or line up somebody to take it down."