

Laurel Wilt Disease in Pinellas County

Theresa Badurek, Urban Horticulture Extension Agent



A redbay tree that has died from Laurel Wilt.
Photographed at the Florida Botanical Gardens in Largo, Florida.

Redbay ambrosia beetle (*Xyleborus glabratus*):



Photo: Mike Thomas FDACS/DPI

Photo: A. Mayfield, FDACS

Laurel Wilt Disease

Some of the leaves on trees in Pinellas County are changing colors, but it's not so pretty. Unfortunately we are seeing an increase in the number of bay trees (*Persea* spp.) being hit by the deadly laurel wilt disease. Trees in the Lauraceae family including redbay and swamp bay are susceptible to laurel wilt. This is caused by an insect/disease complex and spread by the redbay ambrosia beetle (*Xyleborus glabratus*). See photos below of the beetle. This tiny little insect bores into the tree and farms a fungus (*Raffaelea* sp.) in the vascular tissue of the wood for its own feeding purposes. This fungal growth inhibits the circulation of water and nutrients in the tree and eventually leads to the death of the tree.

First Detection in Pinellas County

Laurel wilt was first detected in our county in John Chestnut Park in late 2011 and is now devastating the bay trees in that park as well as spreading to nearby Brooker Creek Preserve. Unfortunately it has also been found here at the Extension Office in Largo. Leaves on an affected tree wilt and take on a reddish/purple color, hanging on the branches sometimes up to a year after the tree has died. Sawdust tubes will often be found on the trunk indicating where the beetles have bored into the wood.



Sawdust tubes found on the trunk indicating where the beetles have bored into the wood.
Photographed at the Florida Botanical Gardens in Largo, Florida.

What can be done?

There is nothing that can be done for an infected tree other than removing it. Burning of the affected wood is recommended (always check local authorities and get any permits necessary), but if that is not possible it can be chipped on site to reduce the breeding and dispersal of the beetle. Moving the affected wood offsite is not recommended, but covering the chipped material onsite is acceptable if burning is not an option. There are no effective fungicides for a tree that is already diseased, but there are treatment options available that are showing usefulness as a preventative measure. This is not practical or affordable on all of the susceptible trees, but may be reasonable on a high-value or sentimental tree. Consult with a certified arborist if you are considering this type of treatment. It is done via trunk injection and would require regular maintenance indefinitely to afford any protection.

You should also know that (guacamole lovers may want to sit down) avocado trees (*Persea americana*) are also affected by laurel wilt and unfortunately there are no approved treatments for dooryard avocados. Do not despair though, much research is being done on laurel wilt and I think we should remain hopeful that a solution or management option may be found. In the meantime, keep an eye on our trees and do not move firewood, tree trimmings, mulch, etc. outside the county.

For more info on the disease and how you can help reduce/slow it's spread please visit the following websites:

Laurel Wilt: A Threat to Redbay, Avocado and Related Trees in Urban and Rural Landscapes:
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hs391>

Division of Plant Industry: <http://savetheguac.com/>