

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO CREDIT: Dr. William M. Johnson

The abrasive action of line trimmers or "weed eaters" used around tree trunks can result in extensive damage to the bark of landscape trees. In some cases, the bark of a tree is only partially damaged and may result in an unthrifty, slow-growing tree. In other cases, bark damage can result in the death of a tree.

Q: I have been told that trees can be eventually killed if their trunks are damaged by flexible string trimmers. How does this happen, and how long can an affected tree live?

A: A weakening and eventual death of a tree occurs if a section of bark is removed or damaged completely around the trunk. This process is known as

tree girdling. In home and commercial landscapes, tree girdling is often the result of the abrasive action of line trimmers.

Tree girdling is often a problem with trees that produce a thin layer of bark (such as crepe myrtles). However, trees that have thick bark (including pines) can be girdled with repeated use of line trim-

mers. The invention of the line trimmer provided an unintended effect for the nursery trade—it has resulted in the eventual decline and death of many landscape trees and shrubs which are usually replaced.

Any damage sustained by bark can impact the health of a tree. Sugars produced in the leaves by



August 15, 2018



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News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.



photosynthesis are translocated downward to the roots through the cambium or vascular tissue located beneath the bark layer. The root cells add mineral elements absorbed from the soil solution to these sugars to produce other compounds required for growth and development. When the supply of sugar is interrupted by girdling, the available sugar and stored carbohydrates are gradually depleted and the roots die.

Likewise, tree roots absorb water from soil and transport water upwards to leaves through another layer of cells (known as xylem) in the cambium. When the supply of water to leaves is interrupted by girdling, the impact can also be devastating to the health of the tree.

It would not be possible to predict how long a given tree might live after being girdled. If a tree is completely girdled, it may die within a few weeks or months but there have been cases of girdled trees continuing to grow for two years and then failing to leaf out the third year.

In many cases, the bark of a tree is only partially damaged resulting in an unthrifty, slow-growing tree. Damage to the bark also increases the possibility of infection by fungi. The prognosis is most positive when only a limited area of bark is damaged and the trunk is no longer subject to line trimmer damage. In such cases, the tree will be better able to heal over the damaged section.

Q: I still have some vegetable seeds left over from the spring season

and even from last year's season that I would like to use for the upcoming fall season. Are the seeds still viable?

A: In general, if the seeds have been stored well, many of them will germinate fairly well even if a couple of years old. Expect reduced germination, however, so plant slightly thicker than suggested for fresh seed. If good germination results, thin seedlings appropriately. Many garden seeds may be kept for two years or even longer in a cool, dry location. Place in a tight jar or can to keep them dry.

Seeds reported to lose germination most rapidly include: sweet corn, okra, onion, and parsley. However, I should note that we planted seeds of okra in the Discovery Garden at the Extension Office in mid-July. The okra seeds had been maintained for 4 years in a sealed jar in a storage room. We expected to have a low germination percentage and therefore planted them very thickly. I believe every seed germinated as we had to heavily thin the seedling stand twice!

Q: Why is the bark coming off my sycamore trees?

A: You do not have to be concerned about this. It's a natural occurrence as sycamores (in addition to crape myrtles) shed their bark in distinctive style. It actually adds to the beauty of these trees and in fact horticulturists refer to this type of bark as exfoliating bark. Pines, pecans and other trees shed their bark though it happens in a less attractive style.

Upcoming Seminars

WHAT: Urban Small Backyard Gardening

WHEN: 1:00 - 2:30 p.m. on Saturday, August 18

TOPICS: Galveston County Master Gardener Herman Auer, Galveston County Master Gardener class of 1983, will discuss growing plants in full sunlight, maximizing the production of vegetables by growing them upward/vertically, and growing fruit trees in the small urban backyard. The speaker has 60 years of gardening know-how.

WHERE: Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office located in Carbide Park (4102-B Main St. in La Marque). Pre-registration required (e-mail galvcountymgs@gmail.com or phone 281-309-5065).

WHAT: Propagating Tomato Plants Using Cuttings

WHEN: 2:30 - 3:00 p.m. on Saturday, August 18

TOPICS: Galveston County Master Gardener Nancy Langston-Noh will discuss how to propagate tomato plants from cuttings, using the tips to produce your fall production of tomato plants.

WHERE: Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office located in Carbide Park (4102-B Main St. in La Marque). Pre-registration required (e-mail galvcountymgs@gmail.com or phone 281-309-5065).

