NEWS RELEASE FROM THE OFFICE OF:

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Fire Blight of Pear

Many Bradford pear trees are showing signs of fire blight around the Gregg County area.

In Texas, pear tree owners can expect to see some fire blight on pears and other species every year. During times when conditions are right, such as when extended cool, wet spring weather coincides with pear tree blooming, the severity of fire blight infection can reach epidemic proportions. The disease also attacks apple trees, quince, spiraea, hawthorne and as many as 70 other species.

The fact that an ornamental pear, such as Bradford, has been infected is a sign that this could be an unusually bad year for blight.

Though it makes the tree unsightly, the disease will rarely kill an ornamental or other pear variety. Ornamental pear tree owners can expect their trees to bounce back later in the year.

In the spring, the disease usually first shows up as blossom blight. Infected blossoms become water-soaked and then turn dark brown. The disease then moves down the fruit stem, causing the area it infects to become water soaked and turn dark green. From the fruit stem, the disease migrates into the leaves of the blighted spur.

Twigs become dark green and oily looking when infected. Pear tree leaves and stems will eventually turn black, as if burned, hence the name "fire blight." In contrast, the disease turns apple tree leaves and stems dark brown.

Other than variety selection, home gardeners have two means of controlling the disease: cultural and chemical. Cultural methods involve pruning the infected portion of the stem, four to six inches below the visible symptoms. Pruning shears should be disinfected in a 10 percent bleach solution to prevent spreading the disease to uninfected trees.

Excessive pruning can promote succulent growth that is highly susceptible to new infection. Excessive pruning can also cause the tree to become misshapen, so caution should be used when pruning.
Several chemical and antibiotic controls exist for fire blight, but they are only effective if used during the bloom stage. A copper fungicide such as Kocide 101 or bordeaux mix should be applied during bloom at the shortest recommended intervals stated on the label. Another option is to use an antibiotic such as streptomycin sulfate. Neither the copper fungicides nor the streptomycin sulfate is toxic to bees. Preventing early infection is critical to controlling fire blight.

Once the bacterium that cause fire blight colonizes woody tissue, the only way to stop movement down a young stem or branch is to prune it out. If you treat before or after bloom, the spray will be ineffective.

Dry, hot weather will eventually slow disease development. Except for young specimens and highly susceptible varieties such as Bartlett, most trees will eventually recover.

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