Emerald Ash Borer Spreads Through Tri-State

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A month or so ago, I received word from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) that emerald ash borer had been positively identified for the first time in Posey County. A year ago, this pest had been discovered in Warrick County. Although we have not had a positive find in Vanderburgh County as I write this, most of us in the tree care business are fairly certain it's already here.

Starting with this article and for the next few weeks, I'm going to be covering the biology and history of this insect; what the symptoms of an infested tree are; how to protect your ash trees; and whether you should protect your ash trees. I will also discuss other exotic invasive pests that we should be on the lookout for here in the tri-state.

Emerald ash borer (EAB) was first detected in the US in 2002, although researchers now believe it had arrived in North America as much as 10 years earlier than that. Since its accidental introduction from Asia, this invasive pest has killed an estimated 250 million ash trees (Fraxinus spp.) in forest, riparian, and urban settings. In some forests near the epicenter of the invasion in southeast Michigan, more than 99% of the ash trees with trunks greater than 1 inch in diameter have been killed. All North American species of ash that EAB has encountered to date are susceptible to varying degrees. It appears likely that EAB could make one of North America's most widely distributed tree genera practically extinct, much the way Dutch elm disease removed the stately American elm from our landscapes.

Most tree borers are considered secondary pests. They are attracted to trees that are already under stress from some other cause, such as drought, construction injury, or girdling roots. Although many gardeners worry about "borers killing their trees," in reality, these trees were already starting to die. The borers are simply finishing the tree off.

EAB is different, though. It acts like a primary pest to all species of ash native to North America, much like Colorado potato beetle attacking potatoes, or Japanese beetle attacking…well, just about everything. They will attack healthy trees and kill them, often within three years of first infestation.

The reason these insects are causing so much panic is because of the sheer number of ash trees in North America. Some forestry sites estimate that species of ash make up nearly 5% of all trees in our forests. Urban tree plantings can be made up of anywhere from 7 to 25% ash in some communities. That is a LOT of trees to be dying all at once! While our forests will rebound on their own with a succession of other species, many neighborhoods have become completely barren of shade because of this insect.

As I said, I'll be covering what to look for in future weeks, but if you really need to have more information now, please visit Purdue's EAB website: http://extension.entm.purdue.edu/EAB/, or contact me at (812) 435-5287.