One of the most frequent questions we get in our diagnostic plant clinic is, “Why is my citrus tree dying?” Unfortunately, there is not a quick and concise answer to this question. There are my diseases and insects that attack citrus trees. Some are easily cured and some are not. Recently, many trees seem to be experiencing severe canopy dieback. Dieback is when there is a loss of leaves and branches starting in the top of the tree. This dieback can be caused by a number of different things. Phytophthora root rot, tristeza, citrus greening, severe nutrient deficiencies or herbicide damage are all possible causes of dieback.

Phytophthora is a soil-borne disease that attacks the roots of the citrus tree. Besides causing dieback in the tree, it also causes the bark to peel from the tree, usually from the ground upward. The tree also may start to “bleed” a reddish brown resin from its trunk. There is no cure for this disease, but you can prevent it.

To prevent phytophthora, plant citrus trees in an area that is well drained, meaning that it does not flood with heavy rainfall. Citrus trees like water, but they do not like to have their roots sitting in water for prolonged periods of time. Also, make sure trees are planted at the correct depth. The correct depth is no deeper than it was in the container before you planted it. You should be able to see the “flare” of the trunk above the soil surface. The most important tip is to keep the area under the canopy of tree free of mulch, stone, grass, and weeds. These items can increase moisture and humidity levels around the tree roots and around the trunk, which may cause disease. Therefore, only dirt, bare ground, under the canopy of the citrus trees.

Tristeza is a virus that affects trees greater than 20 years old. This disease shows similar symptoms as phytophthora, but only occurs on older trees that were grafted on sour orange rootstocks. If you believe your tree has tristeza, remove the tree and replant with a new tree. Citrus today are no longer crafted on sour orange rootstocks, so young trees will not be affected by this virus.

Citrus greening is a devastating disease attacking trees in Florida. Not only does it cause your tree to slowly die, it also causes the fruit to become bitter and inedible. The leaves will show asymmetrical yellowing. This disease is spread from tree to tree by an insect, the citrus psyllid. Citrus greening is prevalent in Osceola County, causing homeowner trees and commercial trees to die. Unfortunately there is no cure for this disease or no way to prevent it from attacking your tree.

Finally, nutrient deficiencies and herbicide damage can cause dieback in your citrus trees. For nutrient deficiencies, look for symmetrical discoloration on the leaves. Remember, citrus greening shows asymmetrical yellowing, so if the discoloration is symmetrical, it is most likely nutrient related. Citrus trees need fertilizer to properly grow and produce fruit. They should be fertilized 3-4 times a year between the months of March and October. The older the tree, the more fertilizer it will require to remain healthy.

Herbicide damage to citrus trees can be difficult to diagnose, however heavy use of “weed and feed” products used in the lawn around the trees or heavy use of “roundup” and other herbicides under the canopy of the tree can cause dieback. Regular use of these products
should not cause any issues with your tree. If you are careful on how much you apply near your citrus tree and do not use herbicides heavily around them, your tree will not experience herbicide damage.

For more information on these citrus problems or for more information on citrus tree care, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at 321-697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. You also may email me with any gardening questions at jwel2@osceola.org.

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