

## Live Oaks in Central Florida

Jennifer Pelham, Urban Horticulture Agent  
University of Florida IFAS Extension in Osceola County

The hot topic in the Osceola County Master Gardener Plant Clinic this week is the live oak trees. Many called concerned about the amount of leaves the oaks are losing this spring. Some actually believed their oaks are dying. Let me put your minds at ease and tell you that this is a normal process that they do. There is nothing to be concerned about. Live oaks are semi-deciduous trees, which means they will lose half to all of their leaves every year. This year, they are just losing more leaves than we've seen in the past.

Southern live oaks, *Quercus virginiana*, are native Florida trees. Their large, sprawling branches, often adorned with Spanish moss, are definitely reminiscent of the Old South. The impressive branches of the live oak offer deep shade and protection from the hot Florida sun, while providing for many creatures and critters that occupy our region, including food, shelter, nest, and roost areas. As a species, oak trees are among the most useful hardwood trees to many species of animals. Capable of reaching 40 to 60 feet in height with a 60 to 100 foot spread, live oaks are one of the largest trees in central Florida.

Live oaks can thrive in almost any location. However, they do have an aggressive root system. Make sure to plant live oaks at least 15 feet from a structure or concrete area, such as a driveway or sidewalk. When planted too close, over time, the roots will grow in girth and will lift sidewalks, curbs and driveways. They have also been known to compromise foundations and septic tanks.

When maintained and pruned properly, live oaks are very strong trees with good wind resistance. They proved themselves as one of the strongest trees during the 2004 hurricanes that swept through our region. However, care must be taken to develop a strong branch structure early on of a tree's life. It is very important to eliminate defects in the tree such as, multiple trunks and branches which form a narrow angle with the trunk, as these are likely to split from the tree as it grows older.

Young trees should be pruned for good structure once a year for the first three years, then every five years to age 30. This will help ensure that the tree develops into a strong, long-lived, tree in your landscape. When hiring a tree professional to prune your trees, make sure they are insured and are a Certified Arborist through the International Society of Arboriculture to ensure proper care.

Live oaks are very sensitive to activity around their root systems. Care should be given not to park vehicles under the trees or store heavy items over their root systems. They are also easily damaged by construction activities, which include damaging the roots from compaction and cutting. Construction-impacted trees take a long time to die, giving live oaks a reputation for being a tough tree. It may take 3-5 years for a live oak tree to die around a newly constructed

building. Trees should be properly protected around construction projects if they are meant to be saved.

I've seen too many "prized" trees die from homeowners constructing patios under the tree. The compaction of the soil to build the patio foundation removes the oxygen from the soil, which in turn suffocates the tree roots, causing the tree to die. A dead tree will definitely eliminate the need for a patio under it. Try building a deck under it instead to preserve the roots and the life of the tree.

In central Florida, live oaks are usually pest-free. A few galls found on the leaves or twigs, may concern some homeowners, but they are considered harmless to the tree and no chemical control is needed. Spanish moss and ball moss are also harmless to the trees. Spanish moss and ball moss are considered epiphytes or "air" plants. They take all their water and nutrients from the atmosphere. Epiphytes do attach themselves to plants, but they do not harm the plants.

For more information on how live oaks, trees for central Florida, or on proper pruning techniques, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm.