

Fungus spread by beetle threatens avocado, redbay trees

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Get ready to meet the beetles.

Redbay ambrosia beetles are coming to the Treasure Coast, and they're bringing with them laurel wilt, a fungus deadly to redbay and avocado trees and several other species.

"We don't want people to panic," said Anita S. Neal, director and environmental horticulture agent at the St. Lucie County Cooperative Extension Service. "We do want them to check their landscapes, and if they see what they suspect could be laurel wilt, to notify authorities."

Added Dan Culbert, environmental horticulturist for the Okeechobee County Cooperative Extension Service: "If you have redbay, you like redbay and you want to keep redbay, you'd better beware." □

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What's laurel wilt?

- Laurel wilt disease is caused by a fungus transmitted by the redbay ambrosia beetle, an Asian native thought to have arrived in the United States in 2002 in wood products. Laurel wilt was discovered in 2004.
- Symptoms include wilted stems and leaves, black streaking in the wood and strings of compacted sawdust protruding from tree trunks.
- It's been found in South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. On the Treasure Coast, laurel wilt has been in Indian River County since 2006 and last fall was discovered in northern Okeechobee County.
- The beetle's natural migration spreads the disease 20 or 30 miles per year; redbay transported for use as firewood can spread it throughout the state. □

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Can my trees get it?

- Tree species threatened include redbay, avocado sassafras, pondberry and camphor trees.
- Redbay is a Florida native found extensively in Indian River and St. Lucie counties; some can be found in western Martin County.
- Redbay often is called bay oak because its gnarly limbs resemble live oak. To tell the difference, crush a leaf: If it smells like the bay leaves you put in soup, it's a redbay. □

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What should I do?

- Diseased wood should be quarantined so the beetles can't spread to other wood. Dead or dying bay trees should be covered, chipped or, preferably, burned. Clean saws and blades after use.
- Early research indicates that the fungicide propiconazole injected in the lower trunk where the roots start to flare out can help prevent laurel wilt from developing.
- Suspected laurel wilt symptoms on avocado and redbay trees should be reported to the state Division of Plant Industry at 1-888-397-1517.
- For more information, see "Redbay Ambrosia Beetle-Laurel Wilt Pathogen: A Potential Major Problem for the Florida Avocado Industry" at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HS379>. □



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