Fighting Oak Wilt

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Austin has been called an urban forest. It's part of what makes Central Texas a beautiful place.

A long battle against a deadly tree disease is still taking casualties, and thousands of trees in the city could fall victim.

It's hard to fathom how trees that have stood for decades can die in just a few months. Oak Wilt is a killer, and it's still spreading through Central Texas.

"I'll lose all these trees. Every tree here will be lost," tree owner Stan Hafner said.

Travis Heights in central Austin is just one neighborhood fighting the deadly tree disease oak wilt.

"There were at one time over sixty trees on this property. So yeah, 40 trees have been lost. And much more if you consider my neighbors. This stuff just came through and it's been horrible," Hafner said.

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"You see all the bark that's falling off of them? That's the definitive death," Hafner said.

First documented in 1961, oak wilt has spread to more than 60 Texas counties killing about a million trees.

"And the origins of it are not really known. They don't know if it's been endemic to the U.S. It's not found anywhere else in the world," Kim Camilli with the Texas Forest Service said.

The fungus spreads through root systems and on beetles. It can only be stopped by chemical tree injections and digging deep trenches, but it doesn't always work.

"For Red Oaks, the trees die within four to six weeks. And with live Oaks, they die within six months to a year," Camilli said.

"And every time you think you get to know oak wilt, it surprise you somehow. You can never really say that you know and understand everything about oak wilt," Hafner said.

For these homeowners, the only choice is to look ahead.

"We've gotten to the place where we're putting trees in. So, this is the tree that's going to take the place of these three trees," Hafner said.

If caught early, oak wilt can be overcome, but that means keeping a close watch on your trees.