Some turn to chemicals to save trees from borer

Insecticides offer varied results for homeowners

By Tim De Chant
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As the emerald ash borer continues to invade the Chicago area, some homeowners unwilling to part with their favorite trees are turning to chemical weaponry that can fend off the insect attackers.

Preventive measures against the beetle are getting a fresh look with this month's discovery that the insect has reached Chicago. Several insecticides are available that, with varying success, kill the beetles as they try to gnaw their way into ash trees.

Treating the tree involves either soaking its roots—the cheapest method, but also the least effective, research shows—or giving it annual shots in the trunk.

The newest injected insecticide, emamectin benzoate, marketed as Tree-äge, is said to kill 98 percent of the invading insects and was approved in April for use in Illinois.

The injections, delivered by arborists with caulk gunlike equipment, force the liquid through small holes drilled in the tree bark just above the soil. The insecticide then disperses throughout the tree along with water and nutrients that travel up the trunk and into the branches, a process that can take four weeks.

The chemical kills the larvae of the ash borer or the adults by interrupting the insects' nervous systems after they feed on tree tissues.

When Laura Charboneau heard about the ash borer threat two years ago, she and her husband decided to try to protect 12 beloved ash trees on her Bensenville prop-

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erty. An arborist injected the trees with imicloprid, an older chemical.

"To us it's worth a couple hundred dollars to do whatever you can do to prevent cutting down our beautiful trees," said Charboneau, adding that she would readily spend $1,000 for even more effective treatments.

The shade provided by the couple's trees may offset some of that cost, Charboneau said. The trees reduce their summer cooling bill up to 25 percent, by their calculation.

"If you were to see my house, it's just shaded most of the time," she said.

The chemicals sometimes are applied to try to save an infested ash, but officials say homeowners should contact a professional arborist before deciding whether to treat or remove the tree.

"You don't want to get panicked and take down a tree if it's just something that happens to be a green beetle," said Matt Smith, chief spokesman for Chicago's Department of Streets and Sanitation.

State officials also warn that they have the right to remove an infested tree whether it has been treated with insecticide or not.

None of the available treatments can rid ash trees of the invasive insects completely, said Phil Nixon, entomologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Although injection treatments may be a good option for homeowners, most municipalities will find it outside their price range to treat dozens or hundreds of ash trees, Nixon said.

Still, Smith said the City of Chicago intends to use injectable insecticides along with tree removal to manage the outbreak.

The city also will set more emerald ash borer detection traps and conduct a 12-week survey of ash trees on public land, he said.

"We will get a lot of ash trees that will die out or have to come down, but we will have the chance to save some," Smith said.

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