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Friday, June 1, 2007

New hope in ash borer battle

In sea of dead wood around Metro area, experts find pesticides work, helping Grosse Pointe Farms thrive

Jim Lynch / The Detroit News

GROSSE POINTE FARMS – For many of the Metro Detroit communities where the emerald ash borer has reared its tiny metallic-green head, Grosse Pointe Farms is an example of what might have been.

Five years after many other cities cut down their ash trees to deal with the invasion of the beetles, the Farms can still boast a thriving ash population.

The thinking among experts at the time – Michigan's Department of Agriculture and the Michigan State University Extension – was that ash borer infestation meant inevitable destruction. And the best way to slow the spread of the borer, communities were told, was to start cutting.



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But now there is mounting evidence that pesticides – especially when used on young, healthy trees – can ward off the emerald ash borer for an extended period, giving cities and homeowners an alternative from removing ash trees from the landscape.

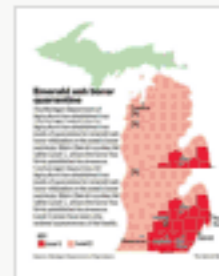
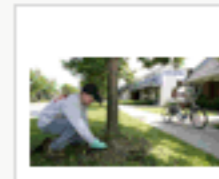
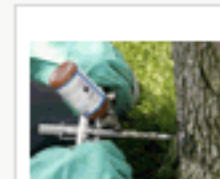
David Vaseau of Dearborn saw the disease damage Ford Woods Park on Greenfield and Ford Road in his neighborhood.

He said the idea of using the pesticide on young trees to kill the disease sounds promising.

"It's been devastating to trees," Vaseau said. "Everywhere I go I see dead trees. Anything that can save trees is wonderful. Environmentalists may not like the idea because it's a pesticide but if it's going to save some trees it's worth it."

Shock Brothers Tree Service in Warren treated the ash trees in Grosse Pointe Farms against the borer. Operator Sue Shock said the state ignored obvious

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sources of information before setting its policies.

"The biggest mistake they made was their failure to sit down and talk to people who work in the field," she said. "We tried to convey to them that there were already some very good products out there that could be effective against the ash borer."

The state Department of Agriculture now recommends the use of pesticides, not cutting, for certain ash trees as a temporary fix while a more permanent solution is found. And in the next 12-18 months, the state will initiate a program to release insects – three species of Chinese wasps – that feast on the larvae of the emerald ash borer.

With several years of research results now in hand, pesticides are a viable alternative to property owners who want to save their ash trees, said Ken Rauscher, the Agriculture Department's division director of pesticide and plant/pest management. He defended past policies.

"It wasn't a mistake at all," he said. "Cities proactively removed a lot of host material by cutting trees down that would have ended up dead anyway."

Pesticides that are commonly used now – containing chemicals such as Imidacloprid and Acephate – do not harm the environment and can be applied three ways:

- Drenching the soil at the base of the tree.
- Spraying the bark of the ash tree.
- Injecting the pesticide directly into the tree trunk.

Grosse Pointe Farms, where contractors used Imidacloprid, is the best example of the offensive-minded approach to the emerald ash borer.

"At the time, the powers that be were saying it was an inevitability – 'You'll lose your ash trees,' " said Terry Brennan, the city's director of public works. "But we couldn't do that."

City Council members voted to bring in a tree service company that offers pesticide treatments to preserve ash trees on public property against the borer. After several years of work, Grosse Pointe Farms has lost three of the roughly 640 trees on its public land.

Michigan State University officials clarified their position on the use of chemicals in 2005. In a newsletter, professor David Smitley, an entomologist, said the university had always maintained chemicals would work on the ash borer as they have on related insects.

"However, since this borer was a new pest – we also said that we can't be certain insecticides will work as well until we conduct some research tests," Smitley wrote.

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