

Tree Borers

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

Release: Week of September 16

If a tree has smaller than one-half inch holes here and there on the trunk, it likely had an insect borer. Visible holes are made by adult borers leaving the tree, rather than an insect boring into the tree. Holes in the trunk indicate borers have been in the tree for at least one season.

If there are rows or lines of about one-half inch holes on a trunk, especially pines, these are made by yellow-bellied sapsucker woodpeckers. The bird drills holes and then licks up the sap. The wounds are typically shallow and do not cause long term harm to healthy trees.

Insect borers can cause lasting harm. However, most tree borers are opportunistic. They tend to attack stressed trees and leave healthy trees alone. When a tree dies back and the trunk is riddled with holes, borers are often blamed.

While borers cause damage and speed up tree death, they are unlikely to be the initial reason for decline. Tree issues can begin with environmental stress like drought, or incorrect planting, watering, and overfertilizing. Once stressed, borers are attracted to the tree.

There are many different types of borers. Fortunately, insects tend to be host specific meaning they attack only one genus or type of tree. When a tree has borers, tree owners may be concerned the borer will spread to other trees. Unless it is the same type of tree and stressed, this is unlikely to occur.

The key to preventing borers is to select the right tree for the location, begin with a smaller tree that has fewer compromised roots, and avoid planting too deep. After planting, mulch with a 3 to 4-inch deep layer of organic mulch and water correctly. In most landscapes, do not fertilize trees in addition to turf fertilization. Excess nitrogen fertilizer increases a trees susceptibility to insects.

If an established tree with signs of borers does not have many dead branches, and stressors such as drought can be reduced; and the tree does not have a major issue like a girdling root or obvious signs of decay, treatment can extend a trees life.

Insecticide treatment for common borers include topical sprays applied to the trunk during egg laying or systemics, mainly imidacloprid, applied to soil. It takes time for systemics to be taken up and moved through the tree. They need to be applied a number of weeks prior to egg laying for the best results.

Many borers overwinter in trees as larvae or adults. They emerge in spring to mate and lay eggs on trees in May and June. This is the most common time for topical sprays. Systemics are best applied earlier in spring when weather allows.

There are some exceptions to this timing. It is important to identify what type of tree you have and which borer is likely present. For shade tree borers found in Nebraska, go to [this link](#).

Stressed ash trees are commonly attacked by native borers. This is, in part, because many were planted as street trees to replace American Elms that died from Dutch elm disease. Ash ended up being overplanted in stressful urban sites.

With the invasive emerald ash borer (EAB) in Nebraska, it would be unwise to spend money on treatment of native ash borers. If you plan to treat a healthy ash tree growing in a key location for EAB, different insecticides than previously mentioned work best when injected into trees in May.

For information on tree borers, feel free to email me at kfeehan2@unl.edu.