

Sudden Oak Death

A GARDENER'S RESPONSE. by Kate Rogers Gessert

For two years, I have conducted a personal quarantine against Sudden Oak Death. Buying new plants, I ask, "Where are they from?" If they are from California or southwest Oregon, I don't buy them. Sometimes it's hard. Twice now I have held in my hands graceful, young western redbuds, with shiny, heart-shaped leaves. I put both plants back. One had been grown in Cave Junction, 35 miles from the SOD outbreak near Brookings. The other came to an Oregon nursery from Washington, but was originally from California.

I've found many nursery people helpful in tracing plant origins. Others snap, "I have enough trouble remembering what all these plants are, without worrying about where they come from!" My quarantine is troublesome, and yet... The oak grove sheltering our house is hundreds of years old. I would feel stupid and guilty watching these tree elders ooze with cankers and die because of sloppiness or plant-greed on my part. And infection would spread from my oaks to others.

However, I'm curious about whether I have been over-reacting. I welcomed a chance to talk to experts about Sudden Oak Death. SOD appeared in California in 1995, and has now spread from the Pacific 60 miles inland, from Big Sur to southern Humboldt County, inexplicably skipping 125 miles north to a nine-mile square of Curry County, Oregon, where it appeared in 2001.

SOD is a *Phytophthora* fungus, invading susceptible tree species through bark. Bleeding cankers appear on tree trunks, and ancient oaks may die in months. Susceptible native trees include black oak, live oak, and tanbark oak. The fungus invades shrubs through leaves or bark, killing some species. It is visible in leaf spots and sometimes branch dieback on rhododendron, manzanita, evergreen huckleberry, and Oregon myrtle, *Umbellularia californica*. *Umbellularia* is a vegetable Typhoid Mary, carrying high concentrations that infect other species. Bigleaf maple becomes infected but survives; madrone may die. Needles and branch tips of Douglas fir and redwood are blighted, but plants live and grow.

SOD spores are found in firewood, leaves, and woodchips from infected plants, in nursery stock, soil, stream water, and rain-splash. Long-distance spread most likely occurs through human transport of infected "host materials."

California's policy is co-existence with SOD; Oregon's is eradication. Infected areas in Curry County have been clearcut, burned, fenced, surrounded with warning signs.

More than two million Oregon acres and hundreds of nurseries have been surveyed, with no further signs of infection. Oregon enforced a strong quarantine policy about incoming California plants, which has recently been overridden by federal policy; the Oregon Department of Agriculture is petitioning to reinstate its own firmer rules. At this time, susceptible plant species from infected counties can be inspected and shipped under U.S. federal quarantine.

What can we do as gardeners to protect our native species, nurseries, and Oregon environment? Carrying back plants of any species from infected counties of California, or adjacent counties, is dangerous. Even if plants are not infected, soil or bark may be. In Europe, SOD has been discovered on rhododendrons, camellias, viburnum species, and pieris, and many nurseries have had recent outbreaks of the disease. When we

buy plants at our local nurseries, we can ask where plants are from, and decide what we can accept and not accept.

For myself, I've decided that my personal quarantine is wise for now, until more is known about the spread of SOD. Other people's quarantines might be more stringent or less. In my opinion, the most comfortable nurseries to shop at are those that buy locally. For example, Down to Earth has growers from Cottage Grove to

Salem. Gossler Farm Nursery stopped bringing any plants from California, southwest Oregon, and Europe two years ago.

By asking questions, you can discover the policies of various nurseries. It is important to tell nurseries what we want and why we are being careful. It is crucial to ask about plants and bulbs from catalogs. Many catalog plants come from all over; some catalog businesses will discuss plant origins, and others refuse.

We should also ask where firewood comes from. Oak firewood from California is cheap now and may appear here. If you travel to or near infected areas, the Oregon Department of Agriculture asks you please to wash soil off shoes, car tires, mountain bikes, and pet paws before coming to Oregon. Ask your visitors from California to do the same.

With care for our plants and land, we may be able to keep SOD out of the Willamette Valley, or if it does come, we may be able to slow it down and give native plants time to adapt and survive.

EW

Web sources:

<http://oda.state.or.us/plant/ppd/path/SOD/>
www.suddenoakdeath.org



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