

Why do Trees Bleed?

by Thomas deHaas

Agriculture Natural Resource Educator, Erie County



Sap flow from a tree sometimes referred to people as 'Bleeding' is most commonly caused by pruning, injury, or stress which can lead to insect feeding or possible disease. Similar to people, when trees sustain an injury, they can bleed or exude sap.

So, let's start with the obvious. Some species of trees will exude sap when pruned. Since we are heading into spring, Maples should not be pruned now. They will emit large amounts of sap. That's why Sugar Maple trees are tapped in mid to late winter, to collect sap that can be boiled to make Maple Syrup. Most varieties of Maples that are pruned in the winter or early spring are sure to bleed. Other good examples of trees that will bleed include birch and walnut which can be tapped in the spring to make syrup.

Good guides for spring pruning of trees and shrubs can be found at:

<https://ohioline.osu.edu/factsheet/HYG-3311-09>

<https://hortnews.extension.iastate.edu/proper-time-prune-trees-and-shrubs>

Honeylocust, is best to trim in late fall after the leaves have fallen or in the early spring, before the sap starts flowing. If trimmed in mid-summer, they will exude sap.

Pruning oaks in the summer can cause them to bleed. This can potentially attract picnic beetles which can carry Oak Wilt disease that can quickly kill the oak. The vascular tissue becomes clogged, Causing the leaves to turn brown and fall, even in the middle of summer.

More on timing of pruning oaks and Oak Wilt can be found in the following post:

<https://bygl.osu.edu/node/2081>

So, the best time to prune Oaks, November 1 – March 31st to be sure the sap will not be flowing. I came across a Pin Oak last summer that was oozing from an old wound. When I smelled the sap, it had a fermented fragrance which attracted flies and ants. This indicated some internal rot.

Pruning at the proper time can prevent bleeding. But trees can be damaged in other ways than pruning injury.

A Sugar Maple, located in a cemetery was fed on by a Sapsucker, a type of bird, that had drilled holes in the tree looking for insects. Since it was late winter, the tree released sap, as if it had been tapped for maple syrup.

Other insect can cause trees to ooze. Weeping Flowering Cherries may show signs of Peach Tree Borer infestation. A clear oozing gum can be release by the tree as a defense against the borer, but the borer is already present in the tree trunk.

Some Dogwoods, Lilacs, and Redbud trees will bleed sap when damaged by Ambrosia Beetle. But this beetle tends to attack trees that are under stress. A healthy growing tree tends to be a less desirable target.

So “Why do Trees Bleed?” the short answer is a response to and injury, just like us! Before you prune, do some research to determine if the timing is right! It all depends on the Genus and Species.

The Erie County Master Gardener’s Annual Plant Sale will be held at the Erie County Fairgrounds on Saturday May 11, from 9am to noon. There will be native plants, ornamentals, trees, annual vegetables, house plants, and much more. Proceeds fund our scholarship program. Come early for the best selection!