

# How to Protect Your Old Oaks



Few landscapes are more inviting than rolling grassland graced with large spreading oaks. The park-like beauty of an oak savanna attracts picnickers as well as developers who may hope that the old trees will lend a touch of grace to their designs. But replacing the grassland with houses, lawns and sidewalks can have devastating effects on the trees. The large, heavy-limbed blue and black oaks that grace our foothills add a great deal of wildlife and aesthetic value. Many of these trees are 300 years old or older. They are hardy trees that have weathered fire and pestilence, flood and drought. But they may not survive being part of the modern suburban landscape.

Homeowners should understand the natural ecosystem these big old trees represent. There is no need to rid trees of lichens that droop from branches, nor to spray oaks to kill gall-forming insects. Native oaks face new hazards in suburban life. Our native oaks are adapted to prolonged summer drought. Watering to maintain green lawns and lush flower beds under these trees can be excessive for oaks and invite root rot in the trees. In fact, the tree in your yard may have already suffered root damage during construction of your house. The roots of oak extend out from the trunk as much as four times the reach of the live branches. Oak roots are susceptible to damage by heavy machinery, compaction of the soil, and also suffocation if extra dirt from excavations is spread across the yard. A tree with damaged roots is not only in danger of dying, but it can also become a serious hazard tree.

There are two basic steps needed to take care of the oaks in your yard. First, turn off the water. Don't try to grow plants with high water demands under your oaks, particularly near the trunk. Especially avoid frequent and shallow watering. You may have to choose between having healthy oaks or a green summer lawn in that part of your yard. Applying water anywhere under the dripline of a tree will cause damage. The most critical zone is the area within 15 feet of the trunk. Second, protect the ground and tree roots from excavation and pavement. Avoid driving vehicles and tractors under the oaks. If you have an old oak in a new subdivision or where tree roots may have been damaged by nearby construction, contact a certified arborist to evaluate and help restore the health of your tree. A majestic old oak can add much to the value of your home and the pleasure of your yard. It is well worth understanding how to keep them healthy.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact the Farm Advisor's office at [cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu](mailto:cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu) or 754-6477 with your agricultural questions. Talk to a certified Master Gardener every Wednesday, 10:00-12:00, 754-2880. To speak with a Master Gardener in Tuolumne County, please call 209 533-5696.