

Personal Observations

By Pat Wentworth

Several issues ago, I made the observation that when you cover the trunk or root collar of a live oak, it caused an excessive amount of root sprouts to form. I made this comment several years ago during an oak wilt tour and Dr. Dave Appel commented on that being “an interesting observation.”

Now, Dr. Genhua Niu and Dr. Yin-Tung Wang, both of Texas A&M have come to the same conclusion. As a clonal species, live oaks will readily develop root sprouts when the trunk or root flare is buried. It also turns out that these root sprouts, or more correctly called “rhizomic shoots,” may be the best way to propagate live oaks. Rooted cuttings of established trees failed 75% of the time, but when the rhizomic shoots were collected and properly treated, they had a 100% success rate at rooting. They also found that the wide variations of leaf morphology, tree form and growth rate experienced with growing oaks from fall collected acorns could be entirely eliminated by using rhizomic shoots.

When comparing seedlings grown from acorns with starts from the rhizomic shoots, they found no significant difference in size or growth rate. They did find that seedlings (all from acorns collected from the same tree as were the rhizomic shoots) did exhibit a tremendous variability while all of the root cuttings were exactly the same. *And* the rhizomic shoots did not produce any rhizomic shoots of their own when planted at the correct depth.

Lesson learned? Do not over-mulch or bury the root flares of a live oak (or any tree.) Experience among many is beginning to show that most trees should be planted an inch or two “too high.”

When you encounter a live oak with hundreds (or thousands) of root sprouts near the trunk, they can be eliminated if you lower the soil back to the original grade. It takes an air spade, a lot of patience, and frequently a good deal of money if your client wants to eliminate the root sprouts around the base of their live oak trees. If not, some folks will treat the sprouts like a ground cover. Trim the rhizomic sprouts back to the ground should be done only during the heat of the summer and/or during the dead of winter to minimize the possibility of getting oak wilt. Encourage either less mulch or the removal of the offending fill soil causing the sprouting for long-term tree health.