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Moving target

Tree by tree, emerald ash borer continues its spread across northwestern Ohio

By Dirk VanderHart
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

NORTH BALTIMORE, Ohio — Dozens of dirt plots, sparsely covered by newly planted grass, dot the otherwise pristine lawn.

They held trees once — ash trees that Russ and Lois Heilman left standing for shade when they cleared 5 acres for their home 35 years ago.

That was before the beetle, before state officials realized that more than 100,000 of North Baltimore's ash trees and saplings would have to go to prevent the beetle from gaining ground in Ohio.

Bark from one of Russ and Lois Heilman's trees shows signs of emerald ash borer infestation.

Russ Heilman is either to thank or to blame for this.

During the summer of 2003, the Heilmans' ash trees began dying. Leaves fell off, branches showed signs of decay. Heilman reported it to Ohio Department of Natural Resources officials in nearby Findlay, but they didn't consider it evidence that the emerald ash borer had traveled from its foothold in Michigan and the Toledo area into the town of almost 3,500 people.

Later, as trees continued to die, Heilman brought in a metallic-green, fingernail-sized beetle to those officials.

"They got excited then."

Soon, nearly 400 ash trees — some of them just inches tall — around the Heilmans' red-brick ranch-style home were marked for death.

"I bawled," Mrs. Heilman said. "I didn't want to lose the trees."

Two beauties near the front door are gone. So are dozens out back, including one the couple used to hang their clothesline on, and ones on the side of the house and near the garage.

The Heilmans' home now stays drenched in sunlight for much of the day.

"Our air conditioner's going to get a workout this year," Mrs. Heilman said.

Among the 15 battlegrounds on which the Ohio Department of Agriculture and other agencies are fighting the emerald ash borer, North Baltimore is considered an outlier. Although the Asian pest spread naturally in northwestern Ohio, it must have had help to reach the city in southern Wood County, said Lucia Hunt, an emerald ash borer survey coordinator for the Agriculture Department.

Hunt guesses the bug might have come to North Baltimore on nursery trees delivered to a nearby housing development. It would've traveled undetected, as it did on its journey from Asia to Michigan, where it first took hold and likely will

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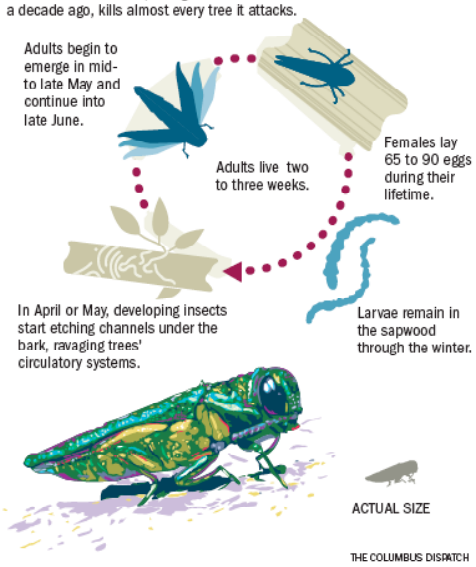
Emerald ash borer life cycle

The emerald ash borer, thought to have arrived from Asia a decade ago, kills almost every tree it attacks.



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Logger Warren Stutesman of Asplundh Tree Expert Co. drags ash trees into a fire pit in southern Wood County. When the borer finishes with one ash tree, it flies in search of another, traveling about a half mile a year. This distance has dictated the way officials seek to eradicate the ash borer. From any given point of infestation, workers identify and examine every ash tree within a half-mile. If no ash borers are found, the trees are chopped down and either chipped or burned. If ash borers are seen, another circle must be drawn and the process continued.

Defense cuts

State officials have cut more than 200,000 ash trees (including saplings) in and around infected sites to combat the emerald ash borer. A breakdown of the ash trees eradicated at each site:

CUTTING SITES IN 2005	
North Baltimore	100,000
Oregon area	48,000
Oak Openings area	2,100
COMPLETED SITES	
Columbus	17,713
Hicksville	3,379
Rossford	424
Toledo Express Airport	10,000
Whitehouse	6,000
Pioneer	10,439

Sources: U.S. Forest Service

Sources: U.S. Forest Service, Associated Press

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ASH BORER

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destroy most ash trees in the state's lower peninsula.

The borer embeds itself within ash wood, gnawing at vital layers beneath the surface and cutting off the tree's nourishment. It eventually makes its way out of the tree and flies about a half-mile a year in search of another food source.

This distance has dictated the way officials seek to eradicate the ash borer. From any given point of infestation, workers identify and examine every ash tree within a half-mile. If no ash borers are found, the trees are chopped down and either chipped or burned. If ash borers are seen, another circle must be drawn and the process continued.

The method might not be ideal, but it's the best option available, said Dan Herms, an entomologist with Ohio State University's Agricultural Research and Development Center at Wooster.

"The question really to be asked is, 'What's the alternative?' " he said. "If we don't do it, we know what's going to happen and the cost is going to be hundreds of billions of dollars."

So far, the technique seems to have eliminated infestations in Franklin and Defiance counties, he said.

Herms is optimistic that the state can eliminate the ash borer but acknowledged that there are no guarantees.

"A lot will depend on the federal budget process," he said. "If they are not forthcoming, this certainly won't work."

Ohio has received $10.7 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture of a requested $11.6 million to fight the borer this year.

As in other communities fighting the ash borer, public response to the state's actions varies in North Baltimore. The Heilmans describe eradication crews as doing a "good job," but others resent that the state is taking their trees.

"They should pay me for my trees and not (just) take them. That's how communists do it," said Joe Stefanka, 81. Stefanka refused to let crews cut on his 40-acre property until he was given a court order not to interfere.

He expressed doubt about the destructive capabilities of the ash borer.

"Other trees live and die," he said. "Let nature take its course."

Stefanka's nephew and neighbor also fought the state over cutting on their properties.

Most homeowners have been receptive, said Curt Hiser, a foreman for Asplundh Tree Expert Co., the company hired to carry out eradication in Ohio.

He's been fighting the ash borer since he was called in to combat the beetle's brief residence near Easton Town Center in fall 2003.

"Every now and then you run into an irate landowner, but overall things have been fantastic," Hiser said.

In areas that haven't been landscaped, Asplundh crews use specialized machines — things with names like "beaver squeezer" — to retrieve suspect trees in heavy woods. Other trees sometimes are gouged or killed in the process, but it is fairly efficient, Hiser said.

When the ash trees have been cut, workers spray their stumps with herbicide to prevent future growth. They then remove debris and level soil to reduce man-made aftereffects.

Removing trees from people's yards is more delicate. The Heilmans didn't want heavy machinery on their driveway, so workers cut trees by hand to prevent marring the lawn. Then they ground out stumps, then put down topsoil and grass seed.

Through the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the Heilmans will receive saplings to replace some of their ash trees this fall, but Mr. Heilman didn't want to wait. He's already planted sweet gum and sycamore trees.

"They did a real good job," he said. "Kind of tore things up, but not real bad."

For more information about invasive species, go to www.dispatch.com.

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