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Fungus attacks some maples

Raking, bagging can help deter giant tar spot

By Joshua Brown
Free Press Correspondent

Mysterious black spots appearing on maple leaves throughout Chittenden County have some homeowners and tree lovers worried.

"It looks like it was hit by an oil spill," said Mike Egan, holding up a leaf near his house on Catherine Street in Burlington.

Stay calm and keep raking. The splotches are a case of "giant tar spot," a fungus that infects only Norway maples. Although new to the area, it's a familiar sight in other parts of the country.

It won't hurt you — or your trees.

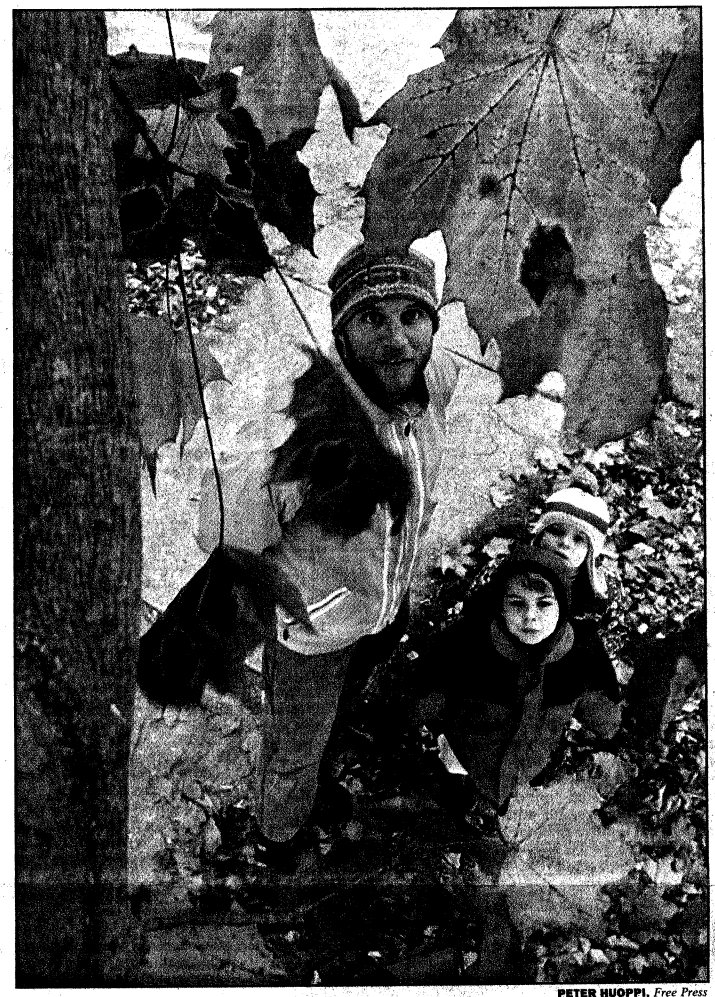
"I've gotten more calls about these tar spots than anything," city arborist Warren Spinner said. "It has caused some defoliation, but the trees will recover."

Dr. Dale Bergdahl, a plant disease expert at the University of Vermont, says smaller varieties of tar spot that infect red, sugar and silver maples are well-known in the area, but the giant tar spot is a new arrival. He noticed a few trees in Burlington with the giant tar spot last year, the first time he had seen it in the city. This year the inky bumps are hard not to notice, especially in places with many Norway maples, such as Shelburne Farms and Burlington's Hill Section.

Although rakers have been wondering about the blighted leaves in recent weeks, the disease has been there for months. Spring's cool, wet weather created ideal conditions for the spores of the fungus, overwintering in the leaf litter, to infect many new leaves.

Pale yellow patches of the fungus have been visible since June, but these didn't develop into eye-catching black bumps until late in the summer. By the time tar spot has developed, leaves have mostly finished their photosynthesis for the year.

See **FUNGUS,** *6A*



PETER HUOPPI, *Free Press*

Jim Sullivan and his son, Magnus, 5, and daughter, Frannie, 3, have noticed black tar fungus on the leaves of the Norway maples outside their Burlington home.

What is giant tar spot?

■ **WHAT:** Rhytisma acerinum fungus, or giant tar spot, creates large black "tar drops" on maple leaves. The fungus survives through the winter on fallen leaves. In the spring the spores infect young maple leaves.

■ **TREE HEALTH:** No long-term damage.

■ **BEST TREATMENT:** Rake and then compost.

■ **WHERE TO COMPOST:**
Back yard (turn pile often to keep hot).

Burlington leaf pickup begins next week on the same day as regular recycling.

Intervale Compost Products: 282 Intervale Road, Burlington. Open 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday through Friday. Special leaf drop-off 8 a.m.-4 p.m. today. 660-4949.

■ **FUNGICIDE:** Not effective against the widespread spores.

■ **NEXT YEAR:** The tar spots might return, depending on the spring weather.

FUNGUS: Maples affected

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Many people are only now noticing the spots as they stuff leaves into paper bags.

A few doors up Catherine Street from Mike Egan's house, Jim Sullivan stood in his leaf-covered back yard. "I've seen ... (the tar spot) all over town," said Sullivan, a recent arrival from West Virginia. "It looks like black-eyed peas." Pushing his two children on a swing hanging from a tree, he looked around. "I guess I better get raking soon," he said.

That's the best treatment for the tar spot. Raking and composting leaves can kill the spores, Spinner said. With high levels of the fungus in the area, though, another wet spring could bring a repeat of this year's blight.

Bergdahl says the giant tar spot is an exotic European species, Rhytisma acerinum, that appears on the upper leaf surface of Norway maples. It forms an unsightly blotch "the size of a quarter or bigger."

These large spots distinguish it from two other tar spot species that cause "dime-sized" or "pinhead" infections on red, sugar and silver maples. This year, the other tar spots have a "very low incidence," he said. Only the giant tar spot seems to be widespread.

Giant tar spot was probably introduced to the United States in the late 1930s. Towns in upstate New York have been troubled by early leaf drop caused by the tar spot since the 1980s, but the disease has become much more common in the Northeast in the last decade. Bergdahl has seen it in Vermont for the last three years.

Despite its recent spread, the ominous looking giant tar spot is just a "curiosity," Bergdahl said. The real problem is the seemingly innocent Norway maple itself. Like the fungus, these trees are a European import. Once championed as a good landscaping tree for their ability to withstand poor growing conditions, the Norway maple has escaped cultivation and become what ecologists call an "invasive exotic," joining the ranks of unwanted species, like zebra mussels.

The city of Burlington stopped planting Norway maples as a street tree by 1984, Spinner said, but it is rampant in urban hedgerows and damages native forest stands, seeding itself across the landscape. Some homeowners and tree-care companies still plant the Norway maple.

"We shouldn't be planting it," Bergdahl said. "It's crowding out our native sugar and red maples."