

Times-Republican

Iowa cities struggle to remove dying ash trees



Cedar Rapids Forestry Department employees remove an Ash Tree in Cedar Rapids, Iowa on Thursday, July 28, 2022. Ash trees are now dying thanks to the invasive emerald ash borer insect, a fate faced by millions of other ash trees across the state. (Nick Rohlman/The Gazette via AP)

CEDAR RAPIDS — A three-story mature ash tree hangs over Sara Turnquist's property in Iowa City. It has shaded her children's play dates, meetups with neighbors and driveway basketball games for years.

The once-luscious tree is now dying thanks to the invasive emerald ash borer insect, a fate faced by millions of other ash trees across the state.

“It’s just depressing,” 48-year-old teacher Turnquist said about her dying tree. “It provided an environment for us to enjoy when it was hot, and it had a lot of curb appeal. It’s going to be missed.”

The Cedar Rapids Gazette reports that more than a decade into Iowa’s losing battle against the emerald ash borer, many cities still are scrambling to remove dying ash trees from public rights of way.

But the unknown number of ash trees on private properties — sometimes estimated to be three times the number on public property — are the owners’ responsibility. And there is little to no funding or resources to help with removal or treatment costs.

As Iowa residents know all too well after the 2020 derecho, the price tag for tree removal is often steep. Bids for Turnquist’s tree, which is scheduled for removal in October, ranged from \$2,000 to \$5,000.

While private property owners may hesitate to remove their dying ash trees due to the cost, foresters and arborists warn the clock is ticking to remove the trees before they deteriorate into safety hazards.

“Removal fairly quickly as they die is important if they’re in an area where they could be at risk for falling on something or hurting someone,” Iowa Department of Natural Resources district forester Mark Vitosh said. “They do become rather critical rather quick.”

Iowa has an estimated 50 million ash trees in its forested areas and 3 million in its urban areas, Vitosh said. Around 16 percent of public trees in Iowa communities are ash trees, though the species could comprise 50 percent of some locations’ canopies.

These canopies have been under attack by the emerald ash borer — an invasive insect native to Asia that was first recorded in Michigan in 2002. It since has killed tens of millions of ash trees in at least 36 states.

Emerald ash borer was spotted in northeast Iowa in 2010 and slowly has moved west. Linn County confirmed its first case in 2015.

As of July, all but seven of Iowa's 99 counties have confirmed emerald ash borer sightings.

The invasive insect kills ash trees by “cutting off their plumbing,” state entomologist Robin Pruisner said. Small, bullet-shaped and shiny green, it feeds on the “pipes” that transport water and sugars throughout trees, gradually strangling the plants.

When ash trees are infected with emerald ash borers, they release moisture, said Cedar Rapids forestry operations supervisor Rick Newland. Tree conditions often don't change much for the first three to five years of infestation — but effects ramp up by years six and seven when the plants become extremely dry and brittle.

At that stage, the tree has become a safety hazard to its surroundings. Unlike elm trees infected with Dutch elm disease — and which can maintain their structural stability longer — dead ash trees will start dropping limbs more easily.

As the wave of emerald ash borer infections began to roll through Iowa, the state actively warned residents about the danger burrowing into their yards. But preparation costs were too expensive for some communities, said Emma Hanigan, urban forestry coordinator of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

Treatments that fend off emerald ash borers cost around \$200, depending on the tree diameter, and extra doses are needed every two years. Tree removals bear the brunt of the financial burden, ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000 depending on the tree's location and size.

The condition also impacts the price — more deteriorated trees will cost more money to remove because of their brittle state.

“It's really important to get the trees gone when they're like this,” Cedar Rapids City Arborist Todd Fagan said as he gestured to a dead ash tree

being removed alongside a city road. Sliced off branches splintered as they hit the street in a burst of dead wood.

“The longer you wait, the more expensive it gets,” Fagan said.

There are no state or federal financial assistance programs for ash tree removal in Iowa.

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