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What Is the White Stuff Oozing From my Tree Trunk?

Many folks are finding a white frothy fluid oozing from the trunk of their prized tree in their yards and landscape and are asking what is it? and will it kill my tree? I have had numerous calls the last few weeks concerning a disease known as White flux, also known as foamy canker or alcoholic flux, which occurs when bacteria penetrate bark wounds or cracks and the underlying cambial tissue. The multiplying organisms ferment the sap, releasing alcohol and gasses. Pressure from the gasses builds inside the tree, eventually forcing white frothy liquid through the cracked bark.

White Flux or Alcoholic flux, is a stress-related disease that affects sweet gum, oak, elm and willow trees. The disease is caused by a microorganism that ferments the sap that seeps or bleeds from cracks and wounds in the bark. The result is a white, frothy ooze that has a fermenting odor similar to beer. Alcoholic flux is sometimes called frothy flux or foamy canker because of the white ooze that looks and feels like melted marshmallows. Fortunately, this ooze only lasts for a short time in summer. The fluid temporarily bleeding from a tree during warm weather is the external symptom of more serious internal damage. Left unchecked, white-flux bacteria rot the cambial layer, limiting the tree's wound-healing ability. To reduce a tree's risk of white flux, avoid wounding it when you mow or trim weeds and keep it adequately watered during dry, hot weather. Gauge when to water by inserting a tile spade -- available from a garden supply center -- into the soil near the tree. Scoop out a soil sample. If the entire sample feels dry or slightly moist, water the tree. If only it's top is wet, increase watering time so moisture reaches the lower roots. To control a minor infection, cut out the wounded, frothing area and let it heal. To relieve internal pressure that may aid in recovery, drill a small hole (one-half inch diameter or less) directly below the bleeding site and slightly upward into the center of the trunk. Install a tight fitting drainpipe in the drilled hole making sure the end of pipe extends far enough outward so that sap does not fall on the tree. Removal is the only option for trees with severe white flux.

Anything that promotes the overall good health of the tree aids in preventing alcoholic flux. Symptoms usually occur after a period of extremely hot, dry weather, so water the tree deeply during dry spells. Apply the water slowly to encourage absorption to a depth of 18 to 24 inches. Water the entire area under the canopy of the tree and cover the root zone with mulch to cut down on water evaporation and keep the roots cool. A good annual fertilization program helps keep trees healthy and able to resist disease. For mature trees, this means at least one feeding a year, usually in late winter or early spring as the leaves begin to bud. Young trees benefit from two or three smaller feedings over spring and summer. Wounds and cracks in the bark make it easier for the microorganism to enter the tree. Also, you should prune damaged and diseased limbs back to the collar. Use alcohol to clean the pruning tools between cuts so that your tools don't spread disease to other parts of the tree. Take care when using a string trimmer around the tree, and mowing the grass. Unfortunately, there is no effective treatment for flux, but the symptoms only last a short while in a healthy tree. In severe cases, the layer of wood under the bark may become rotten and mushy. If the tree doesn't recover properly, it should be cut down. For more Information call 940-668-5412 or marty.morgan@ag.tamu.edu