

Learning to “Talk Tree”
Willie Chance
Houston County Extension Service
478-542-2020 wchance@uga.edu

How do you listen to trees? Trees are big but they are not loud. They generally whisper. They only shout when the situation is very serious and by then it is often too late. Go outside and stand under the limbs of your favorite tree. Look up at the tree and listen. No, don't put your ear to the trunk! They are not verbal. Trees use body language. Learn to “talk tree.” Look trees over to hear them communicate their needs.

Are the small limbs leafy throughout most of their length? Are there plenty of full-sized leaves? If not, or if there are a lot of small dead branches, then the tree may be trying to say, “I'm hurt!” Some trees will even develop more small branches further down the trunk to replace ones at the top. Injured trees may allow lots of light through the branches.

When we see the canopy thinning, trees are often saying that there is a root problem. Roots have been killed by drought, digging around or driving around the tree, piling soil up next to it or other factors. Once the roots are damaged, the top begins to show problems. The roots are the most important part. Keep them healthy and the tree will usually flourish.

Some tree owners get excited when they see lichens growing on weak trees. Lichens are gray-green, and often flat or ruffled, and stuck on the limbs. They can be peeled off. Ball mosses are similar, but gray-green and moss-like. These do not damage plants. They just grow on plants weakened by other factors. Identify and correct these problems and the tree may recover.

Another way trees warn us they are in trouble is by losing bark. This is a serious problem. A tree's vascular system (like our arteries and veins) is just right under the bark. Once the bark dies and falls off, this system is destroyed or disturbed in this area. If a tree loses bark from 50% of its diameter, it is like a person with a 50% heart blockage.

We cannot do much if your tree is in serious decline. It may take years to recover, if ever. We often do not hear what trees are saying until they finally shout at us by losing limbs, leaves, etc. By then it may be too late. Check on and care for your friend before it is too late.

Improve tree health by watering during drought with one inch of water once a week. Do not water every day or every other day. Do not drive over or dig around tree roots. Consider killing the grass over their roots and replace with a two to four-inch mulch. Do not run into trees with weed eaters or mowers.

Select trees well adapted to our area and the spot you will plant them into. Plant in the winter months from November through February – the earlier the better. This helps them to get established well before summer's dry weather. Dig very wide planting holes at least two to five times the width of the root ball. The best method is to till large beds and then plant into them. Then mulch the entire bed and keep the grass from growing back into this area.