



Tree Damage Alert No 121

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Not all plane sailing.....

Plane trees (*Platanus* species) are common in towns due to a reputation for tolerance to water shortage and to high levels of pollution. Their peeling bark allows them to shed particulate pollutants whilst their huge, stiff leaves make them excellent shade trees. Most, if carefully pruned, perform their job beautifully and live long and 'happy' lives despite the sometimes climatic conditions they experience. However, there are a few issues to be aware of.

Information from the arboriculture community suggests there is a clone of plane, introduced about forty years ago, with a propensity to develop **weak forks**. Though discontinued from propagation some years ago, some trees of this clone appear in the marketplace. Mature trees with this problem are easy to spot, so source plant purchases carefully from reputable nurseries!

Recent studies in Germany have found an ascomycete fungus, *Splanchnonema platani* (anamorph: *Macrodiploidiopsis desmazieresii*) causing **branch dieback** of London plane *Platanus* × *hispanica*. This is normally a weak parasite common in warmer Mediterranean climates and the southern U.S. However, during the hot, dry summer of 2003 it was found attacking mature trees in Germany causing branch death and rapid decay. This pathogen can render trees a threat to public safety; and dead wood should be removed, therefore, before it becomes an unacceptable hazard. In recognition of the still popular former name of the fungus *Massaria platani*, the term "Massaria disease of Plane" has been proposed. We have not seen this problem in Britain.

From recent experience within other European countries two other non-native fungi also have potential to cause us problems. *Ceratocystis fimbriata* f. *platani* (the cause of **Canker stain of plane**¹) originates from the United States and affects, a range of species including London plane and its parents *P. orientalis* and *P. occidentalis*. It is now established in Italy, France and Switzerland, having

been introduced to Italy during World War II on infected crating material from the States. Recent reports from France confirm the fungus is spreading northwards much faster than in the previous decade. It is a wilt pathogen, and infection commonly occurs through fresh wounds, although transfer between trees can occur across root contacts. Symptoms include pronounced xylem staining, severe wilting and tree mortality. Infected trees exhibit sparse, chlorotic foliage and sometimes sunken, elongated or lens-shaped bark cankers which can become roughened and black with age. It is a high risk pathogen having long-lived spores that can be spread through movement of infected material. Affected trees decline so markedly that the disease should not be easily overlooked. It is most unlikely that it has reached our shores and remained undetected. However, the message is to be vigilant!

Phellinus punctatus is currently found on London planes in France and Italy where infection results in **decay**. This fungus can cause cankers on the bark, but being pale buff and flat, sometimes with perennating rays, they are extremely difficult to see on the mottled bark of plane trees. The fruit bodies merge into the bark but the presence of a narrow to broad black zone at the top of the fruit-body is diagnostic. It is a true canker rot, initially causing a rapidly spreading canker before developing an intense white rot involving both sapwood and heartwood. Affected trees have frequently suffered from stem failure through a canker. This pathogen has not yet been reported in the UK.

With changes in climate and increasing imports of planting stock it is possible that all three pathogens mentioned above will become problematic to tree managers in the UK. Keep your eyes open and report anything unusual please contact Forest Research Disease Diagnosis and Advisory Service or the Tree Advice Trust's Arboricultural Advisory and Information Service at the above address

¹ Burdekin, D. A. (1980) Canker stain of London plane. Arboriculture Research Note 25/80/PATH.

