

Twigs on the Ground Under Your Tree are Probably One of Two Things

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It's late summer or early fall, you are out in your yard when you realize that you have small branches all over the ground under and near your tree. You get a sudden hollow feeling in your stomach and fear that your tree is doomed. You run to the garage looking for something, anything, that you might be able to spray the tree with to stop this carnage! Okay, calm down. There's probably not really a lot you can do. Lots of branch tips lying on the ground under your tree usually come down to one of two things and there isn't much you can do for either one. But neither one is likely to kill the tree either!

Pick up some of the small branches and look at where they were cut off the tree. If the branches are fairly small and cut at a nice angle with a somewhat rough and ragged pattern then you are dealing with squirrels. Squirrels build leafy nests in the fall that they use for shelter during the winter. They cut off these leafy branch tips off to carry back up into the tree to build these nests.

The best thing to do in this case is nothing. If you start picking up all the branch tips, the squirrels will just cut off more to have nest building material. Just leave the branches there and the squirrels will pick most of them up. While squirrels don't exclusively use nut trees when they are constructing their nests, they do seem to be quite fond of them if they are available. If you do live out in the country you can try to "depopulate" the squirrels, but this is usually only a short term solution as new populations will move in.

If the branches under your tree, especially an elm tree, are a bit longer and seem to have a very nice buzz saw cut at a very nice right angle, or if it looks like it was cut off by a miniature beaver, then you have an insect known as a twig girdler. While they have a wide host range, I've most often found them on elm trees.

The twig girdler female finds an appropriate tree, goes out towards the end of a branch, cuts some tiny slices in the bark and lays eggs. Then she goes back closer to the tree and starts chewing around the branch until it is just about ready to break off. Then she moves on to another branch tip and begins the same process.

The young twig girdlers need fairly dry wood to burrow in to and live. Over time wind or gravity will break the branch tip off. The girdler larva will live in that branch tip until they emerge as adults next summer. Some of these branch tips can blow a long ways thereby helping to distribute where the next generation will emerge.

Most of the time the actual damage done, while perhaps a little unsightly, is not really very damaging to the tree. Which is a good thing as there really aren't any effective chemicals to stop them. The adults are active over a long time from August to October. Once the eggs hatch, the larvae are inside the branch, impervious to any control attempts. Photos of the twig girdler and their activity can be found at: <http://gearycountyextension.com/Hort/twiggirdler.htm>.

In this case, the best thing to do is to pick up the branch tips and put them in the trash to remove them from the yard or burn them up. Either method will reduce the number of new twig girdlers that will emerge in your yard next year. In summary, neither pest will cause long lasting damage. If you have squirrels, leave the branch tips. If you have twig girdlers, pick them up and get rid of them!