LOCAL NEWS

1,000+ magnolia trees infested with ‘tuliptree scale’ insect in Long Beach, removal might be necessary

Long Beach can be called an urban forest with trees on every street. This is a Magnolia Tree on Magnolia Avenue in Long Beach. Long Beach May 17, 2016. (Photo by Brittany Murray / SCNG)

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Long Beach is home to 7,000 magnolia trees, but that number may shrink in the coming years, thanks to a pest known as the tuliptree scale.

The insects, which favor plants in the magnolia family, suck up tree sap, distort growth and sometimes even kill the trees — but they also secrete a dark, sticky substance that can coat lawns, sidewalks and cars.

The problem has gotten so bad in City Councilman Roberto Uranga's Seventh District — which stretches from Pacific Coast Highway up to Del Amo Boulevard, on Long Beach's western side — that he wants staffers to compile a report on how many trees are infected citywide, how successful treatment efforts have been so far and how much it would cost to remove and replant all of the infected trees.

At Uranga's behest, the City Council on Tuesday, Oct. 8, will weigh whether to direct staff to work on such a report.

"The streets and sidewalks are black," Uranga said in a Friday, Oct. 4, phone interview. "They're full of a tar-looking kind of a substance, and it's very sticky."

Uranga said it's hard to walk his dogs in some areas because of the sick trees, and he's noticed some folks have stopped parking their cars underneath them because the secretions can cause paint damage.

Art Cox, Long Beach's Public Service Bureau manager, said Friday that his team hasn't yet pinned down a specific number of infected trees in Long Beach. But, Cox said, he estimates there are between 1,000 and 2,000.

In recent years, Long Beach officials have tried to treat the trees, with little success. The infestations, meanwhile, have only gotten worse.

"This year, the condition has just exploded," Cox said. "So we're regrouping. We're doing an audit, figuring out exactly what we believe the extent is. We've put in orders for treatment."

During past attempts at treatment, however, only about 20% of trees showed improvement. That's because, Cox said, conditions have to be just right to catch a tree with a tuliptree scale infection before it's too far gone.

Tuliptree scales thrive on young trees or trees that are already in distress because of other environmental issues, like a lack of water. Although Cox said the growing water conservation trend, after years of drought, is an overall good thing, it has made magnolia trees less equipped to fight off an infestation.

For treatment to work, Cox said, "it really takes engagement with the property owner. We really need them to assist us with the irrigation of the tree.

"If the tree's being watered, then the roots are taking in that water and taking up the insecticide." Cox added, "Then (the treatment) will do its work. But it needs to be irrigated on a pretty consistent basis."

Cox said he would like to save as many trees as he can.

"My hope is that we don't have to remove 7,000 trees," he said. "We want to be aggressive — I guess that would be the word — with our treatment and try to get ahead of it, so we can impact it and ride it out."

But, at the end of the day, the trees' fate could be beyond the city's control.

"My hope is that we can guide some treatment, and Mother Nature — well, we can't guide her, but we can watch those conditions," he said.

"We're trying to get everybody through this epidemic," Cox added. "I know that's a big word, but when you have a citywide infestation, that's pretty much what it is."