

Beware of Exploding Trees

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

Folks in Fairfax County are encountering trees that appear to have exploded (Figure 1). The cause of this catastrophic collapse is by something much smaller and more subtle than a lightning strike. The trees are ashes (*Fraxinus* sp.) and a small, close relative, white fringe trees (*Chionanthus virginicus*)—victims of a non-native invasive beetle, the emerald ash borer (*Agilus planipennis*), or EAB for short. A photograph of this insect is in Figure 2.

An East Asian species, the EAB first came to the United States (specifically, Michigan) in 2002 by hiding in imported wood for crates. By 2003, it arrived in other parts of the country, including Fairfax County. Since the insect does not naturally travel fast enough to reach Virginia from Michigan in a year, it either was reintroduced from outside the U.S. or, more likely, hitched a ride in wood products or nursery specimens.

Since the beetles quickly spread, officials immediately tried to contain the problem. Combatting early EAB infections involves injecting the tree with insecticide. Untreated trees incur a 100% mortality rate within two years of first contact; chopping down and incinerating afflicted trees is the only option once the tree shows definite signs of progressed illness. Measures to stop severe outbreaks include treating or removing all other ashes within a certain radius, even ones appearing healthy. Purple, triangular-shaped traps help to monitor EAB populations.

At first, the EAB appeared to be under control. Unfortunately, more local outbreaks happened, with a prominent one forcing the National Park Service to close Theodore Roosevelt Island earlier this year as they managed the infestation and took down sickened trees. The best way people can help battle EABs is to report any sightings to the Virginia Cooperative Extension Office at (703) 324-8556, TTY 711. Capturing specimens, photographs, and locations or GPS coordinates will assist in assessing the outbreak. Other actions people can take against EABs include:

- In your fireplace or chiminea, burn only locally harvested firewood.
- Transport only kiln-dried wood across county lines.
- Purchase only quarantined ash trees from nurseries. EAB entered Prince George's County, MD, through infected tree stock.
- Have afflicted trees treated or taken out (details follow).



Figure 1. This ash tree has no lightning burns. Emerald ash borers destroyed it. The beetle larvae ate the inner bark, preventing proper nutrient flow within the tree, which killed it in one or two years. The wood transforms into a spongy product, seen here on the ground. When the spongy wood reaches a critical tipping point and no longer supports the tree, it instantly gives way, appearing to “explode.” A catastrophic collapse can happen at any time or be triggered by forces like wind, ice, or people climbing the tree. This photograph was taken last March in Clifton.

The only good way to remove an infected, mature ash tree is through an insured, professional tree service company with a licensed arborist on site. Certified arborists have been through the training and do their best to run an honest, aboveboard business. All EAB-infected tree products are incinerated. Taking out this tree is not a job for homeowners since the tree can collapse in a wink—without warning.

Unlicensed home repair and tree workers, aka “woodchucks,” typically lack the expertise to take down an EAB-damaged tree. Woodchucks are another Northern Virginia “pest” receiving recent media attention as they overcharge for shoddy work. Here are several ways to spot woodchucks as this list illustrates activities they did in KPW:

- Swinging from trees with ropes while making Tarzan calls. Any insurance company covering them would drop a customer acting so negligently.
- Allowing tree trunks to fall within inches of a house. A good company lowers branches and logs with ropes instead of letting them freefall.
- Illegally dumping their customers’ yard debris. When called out on it, they give backtalk until they see county credentials and then they “play nice” and comply with cleaning up their mess.
- Spiking a live tree that is only slated for trimming. Usually, tree workers only wear spurs when they are taking down a tree. Although there is no rule against spiking a tree that will remain standing, a good arborist climbs trees with ropes and does not damage the bark with sharp metal objects.
- Leaving stubby branches—a practice no arborist worth their salt does. All of the cuts on trees should be flush with the branch collar.
- No company name or contact information on the vehicles; business cards with nothing more than a cell phone number. Through some investigation, many woodchucks run operations out of Culpeper. Legitimate businesses want to advertise and let everyone know who they are, how to contact them, and see the work they do.
- Driving through neighborhoods soliciting business. Licensed arborists have no need to roam the streets since they usually have busy schedules. People already know their companies through advertising, telephone books, referral websites, etc. Here is a website listing certified arborists serving Fairfax: <http://www.goodtreecare.com/find-an-arborist/va/fairfax>
- Burglaries shortly after woodchucks were in the area. While up in trees, woodchucks case the immediate neighborhood. Robberies typically target woodworkers, contractors, and other households storing high-end tools. Police know about these mini crime syndicates.

Remember that most woodchucks do not have insurance, so if injured on your property—anything from taking down a dangerous EAB tree to their own foolish negligence, the homeowner is accountable. Lacking liability insurance means the homeowner is responsible for any property damage caused by woodchucks. In the proposal, many legitimate tree companies include a copy of their license and liability insurance.

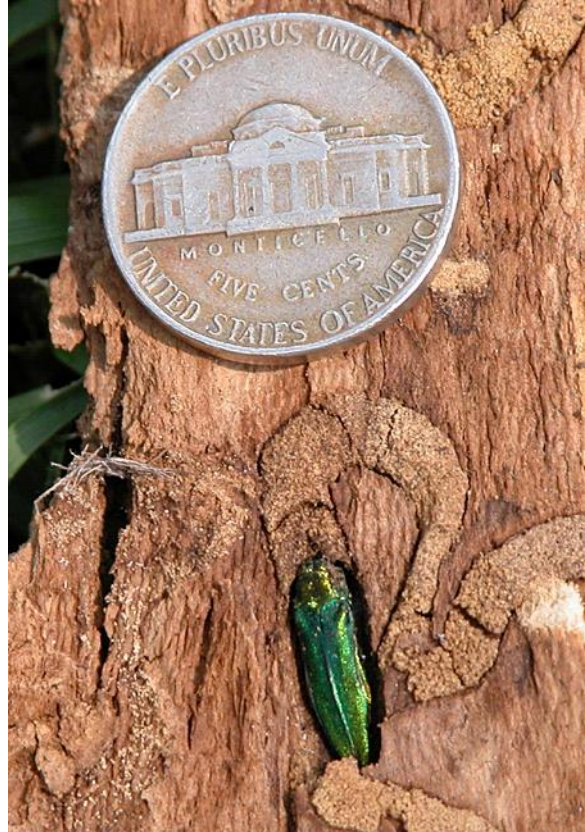


Figure 2. The half-inch-long EAB adult is narrow and metallic green. While the adult does not damage the trees, this image shows the burrows and spongy wood dust created by the larvae. Photo by Eric R. Day and used by permission.

Read more about the emerald ash borer:

https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/2904/2904-1290/2904-1290_pdf.pdf
http://hort.uwex.edu/files/2014/11/Is_My_Ash_Tree_Worth_Treating_for_Emerald_Ash_Borer.pdf
http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/environmental/eab_general.htm
<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/news/emerald-ash-borer-causes-massive-damage.htm>
<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/news2/the-very-hungry-beautiful-beetle-thats-destroying-trees/>
http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/nvswcd/newsletter/watch_ashes.htm

How to identify an ash tree:

<http://www.emeraldashborer.info/documents/E-2892Ash1.pdf>
<http://www.nj.gov/agriculture/divisions/pi/prog/identifyingashtrees.html>

Additional information on certified arborists:

<http://www.isa-arbor.com/findanarborist/arboristsearch.aspx>
<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/consumer/education/selecting-an-arborist-or-tree-care-company.htm>
http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/environmental/how_to_hire_arborist.htm
<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/navbar/faqs/treecare.htm>

Take extra care around woodchucks:

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/news2/dont-fall-for-tree-trimming-scams/>
<https://fcpdnews.wordpress.com/2015/12/30/whos-knocking-on-your-door/>

Jackman, Tom. April 26, 2009. Police and prosecutors warn of home-repair scams. *The Washington Post*
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/25/AR2009042503041.html>

Morse, Dan. February 22, 2017. Judge to fraudster who targeted elderly: 'I can't give you any mercy.'
Washington Post https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/judge-to-fraudster-who-targeted-elderly-i-cant-give-you-any-mercy/2017/02/22/33e48cee-f8fe-11e6-bf01-d47f8cf9b643_story.html?utm_term=.927decd8f398

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