

Have we finally squashed the beetle?

Asian bug that ravaged North Side trees hasn't been seen since 2003-- a rare victory in war against invader pests

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Eight years after Asian longhorned beetles started to slowly kill trees on the North Side, authorities this week will announce a rare success story in the battle against invasive pests. City, state and federal officials will gather Thursday in the Ravenswood neighborhood to lift a quarantine that led to the destruction of 1,500 trees infested with the imported insects.

Chain saws that stripped parts of the neighborhood of its century-old tree canopy will go silent after two years without a sighting of the black-and-white beetles and their menacing antennae.

"We always feared it would spread throughout the city," said Joe McCarthy, senior forester in the Chicago Bureau of Forestry and manager of the city's efforts to stop the beetle. "I'm pleasantly surprised we're at this point today."

Officials are reluctant to declare victory. They still are on the watch for beetles around Oz Park, where signs of the beetles were found in three trees almost two years ago. But lifting the Ravenswood quarantine means the chain saws probably won't be returning to the center of the destruction. Trees can be safely removed from the neighborhood without fear that the beetles will spread.

The Asian longhorned beetle is thought to have sneaked into Ravenswood years ago in wood pallets carrying Chinese-made goods to a nearby hardware importer. By the time it was spotted, in 1998, it had spread to hundreds of trees, and separate infestations later were found in Summit and DuPage County. Those areas were declared pest-free last year.

Asian longhorned beetles frighten forestry experts and arborists across the nation because the insects munch on a variety of trees. The beetles tend to favor maples, chestnuts and other deciduous hardwoods that are common along city streets, including trees planted to replace majestic, arching elms that succumbed to another foreign invader, Dutch elm disease.

Beetle larvae bore deep into the trunk of the tree and eventually kill it by cutting off the circulatory system. Adults chew their way out and spread another generation.

The beetle is considered a minor pest within its native range in China, where trees have developed natural defenses and predators and diseases help keep it in check.

The only sure method to stop the beetle from ravaging tree-lined streets and hardwood forests in North America is to cut down and chip infested trees, though scientists have found a handful of pesticides that can help resist an attack.

As a precautionary measure, federal officials plan to inject 4,000 Chicago trees this year with bug-killing chemicals, down from nearly 90,000 last year--another sign they might have beaten the beetle in Chicago.

Crews spent several years scaling trees and poking around the city's leaf canopy in bucket trucks in search of the beetles.

The last ones found here were in Oz Park, where three infested trees were destroyed in October 2003 after a passerby spotted a beetle perched on a light pole at the intersection of Lincoln and Webster Avenues and Larrabee Street. Since then, there haven't been any sightings of the dime-sized holes the beetles make when they emerge from trees as adults.

Surveillance efforts will continue for another two years in Ravenswood and in three other areas where the bug was found: Kilbourn Park, along the border of Chicago and Park Ridge, and near O'Hare International Airport on Irving Park Road.

Restrictions will remain for now in a 7-square-mile area around Oz Park, bounded by Addison Street to the north, Damen Avenue to the west, Chicago Avenue to the south, and Lake Michigan to the east.

"We've made tremendous progress, but we shouldn't let our guard down," said John Dodd, spokesman for the federal Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, an arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture that battles invasive pests.

The destructive cycle is continuing in New York, where the beetle was first found in the United States in 1996. More than 7,000 trees have been destroyed by the beetle in New York, including 66 last year, according to the USDA.

Infestations also have been discovered in Toronto and two counties in New Jersey.

Quick action usually is the key to success in stopping an invader.

Alarmed by what was happening in New York, Chicago officials decided to take out infested trees within days of finding an Asian longhorned beetle.

More than \$1.5 million was spent replacing the trees with saplings and other landscaping plants.

Other successful eradication programs across the country include efforts to stop the Asian gypsy moth from spreading from North Carolina and Washington during the 1990s, and eliminating the Mediterranean fruit fly in Miami, Tampa, Los Angeles and San Jose.

Chicago officials already are on the lookout for another destructive beetle, the emerald ash borer, which has killed 15 million ash trees in Michigan since it was discovered three years ago in suburban Detroit.

The ash borer has not been found here, but if it reaches Illinois it would find 131 million ash trees to feast upon. There are more than 600,000 ash trees in Chicago alone--14 percent of the city's leaf cover.

Asian longhorned beetles like ash trees, too. Scientists at first didn't think the bug would attack ash, but their experience in Ravenswood changed their minds.

One of the first trees cut down in the neighborhood was a stately ash too big to wrap arms around.

The 100-year-old tree helped lure Cheryl Shure and her husband to the neighborhood. They were forced to install awnings on the second floor of their house to block the sun after the ash came down.

"They did the best they could," Shure said Monday, recalling the city's efforts to replant the block. "But we had the biggest and most beautiful tree on the block and ended up with the saddest. It just wasn't the same."

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