

No need to wine and dine native oaks These hardy trees actually fare better when left alone

Ray Moritz

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Q: We had our yard landscaped two years ago and now our oaks are dying, even though we trimmed, mulched, fed and irrigated them. We have spent a fortune on these trees; what more can we do?



A: If your trees are native oaks, they prefer benign neglect. Native trees are adapted to the natural climate -- wet winters and warm, dry summers. They live a Spartan existence and decline to be wined and dined. Landscaping may involve a number of mechanical and cultural activities that damage native trees. Grading, filling, terracing, trenching, Rototilling, drainage installation, soil compaction, paving, removal of existing vegetation, herbicide applications, planting, irrigation, and excessive fertilization disturb the root systems of native oaks, and many other drought-loving trees, sometimes fatally.

Grading and Rototilling destroy the fine feeder roots that gather soil nutrients in the top soil. Terracing, trenching, drainage and irrigation installation may destroy major portions of the root system, resulting in tree decline or even structural instability. Filling (adding soil to the surface), soil compaction, paving and irrigation often result in root suffocation and root decline. Herbicide application can damage oaks in two ways: Direct contact with roots, foliage or succulent twigs may result in contact toxicity, or absorption of these chemicals may cause systemic toxicity. Also, check whether your fertilizer contains herbicides, and do not use heavy applications around trees.

Summer water encourages a host of fungal pathogens that attack oaks and other trees. As anyone with toes might conclude, fungi like it warm and moist. Until recently even our most respected horticultural authorities recommended the planting of shade- and water-loving plants such as rhododendrons, azaleas, camellias, ferns, and herbs that require regular irrigation under native oaks.

This has led to epidemic losses of amenity oaks. Make sure that all the plants in a specific irrigation zone (station) have the same water requirements. Use only drought-hardy, compatible plants under and around oaks. After all, if you kill your oaks, you may wind up losing your shade plants as well!

I strongly recommend the book: "Compatible Plants Under and Around Oaks," California Oak Foundation (revised 2000), 69 pages, nonmembers \$12, members \$10.80. Go to www.californiaoaks.org and click on "merchandise."

This guide demonstrates that you can have a rich, beautiful garden under native oaks, and preserve the trees as well. The California Oak Foundation site also contains advice on oak care.

Ray Moritz is a Mill Valley arborist. His column will run the first and fifth Wednesdays each month. Send tree-related questions to home@sfchronicle.com or c/o Home&Garden, San Francisco Chronicle, 901 Mission St., San Francisco, 94103

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