Slime Flux of Hardwoods

You cut a branch and liquid starts bubbling out of the wound. You see a trail of darkened wet wood running down from a tree crotch or old injury. You see a whitish-grey plaster or paint covering a swath of bark on a tree. There is a good chance that what you are observing is slime flux.

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Slime flux, also known as bacterial wetwood, is caused by several bacteria that enter a tree through wounds. These wounds can be from string trimmers, lawn mowers, improper pruning, nails affixing something to the tree, boring insects, or even pets scratching the bark. The bacteria multiply within the tree and produce carbon dioxide which eventually forces its way out along with tree sap that runs down the bark of the tree, staining it. Other bacteria and fungi feed off the sap and soon make the sap-stained wood have an unpleasant scent reminiscent of alcohol. The sap and foul scent can attract various insects.

Slime flux rarely kills a healthy tree but may eventually kill one weakened over a period of years by other stressors. There is no cure for slime flux. The fermented sap may ooze for several weeks or months but often stops as suddenly as it appeared. Good tree maintenance is the best preventative:

When removing a limb, do not leave stubs; cut AT the branch collar without cutting into the branch collar. Larger limbs should be cut about halfway through from below at a

spot about 18 inches from the base of the branch before making a second cut all the way through from the top at a spot about 1 inch further out on the branch (about 19 inches from the branch base). Then, cut at the branch collar. Don't use any sealant on the trimmed area. Try not to trim limbs during a time of year when there will be high disease pressure for your tree.

Mulch in a generous ring around the tree to keep string trimmers and lawn mowers away from the trunk and to help insulate the tree roots. A mulch ring at least as large as the tree canopy is expected to grow to that year will help. The roots can extend much further than that. Don't place the mulch all the way against the trunk; that will encourage rot. Leave a couple inches space between the trunk base and the mulch. A two- to four-inch thick layer of mulch is ideal. Be sure not to make the mulch layer any thicker. No volcano mulching.

Even old trees need water during a drought. A tree needs about 10 gallons of water per week per one inch thickness of the trunk at chest height. It is better to water thoroughly once a week rather than dividing the watering up over several days. Don't place a hose so the water hits the trunk; this can encourage rot. Don't use a sprinkler system to water a tree; it won't provide deep enough water penetration into the soil for trees and shrubs.

Every other year, test the soil for pH and nutrients and amend the soil around the tree based on those results. All these maintenance practices help keep trees healthier and make them better able to deal with pests and diseases such as slime flux.