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Managing Green Waste to Prevent Pest Spread

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Left: Box elder logs infested with invasive shothole borers are pictured here. These pests can spread long distances in infested green waste and firewood.
PHOTO CREDIT: MONICA DIMSON, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION



Above: Chipping infested material significantly reduces the survival of wood-boring insects and pathogens.
PHOTO CREDIT: BEATRIZ NOBUA-BEHRMANN, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION.

Green waste is an inevitable byproduct of tree care and landscape management. Whether from routine pruning, tree removals, or storm damage cleanup, branches, logs, and wood chips accumulate as part of the job. Often, the priority for landscape professionals is simply to remove and dispose of this material as efficiently as possible. However, without proper management, green waste can become a vehicle for spreading invasive pests and diseases, posing a serious threat to trees and landscapes. Improper disposal has contributed to widespread tree mortality, increased management costs, and ecological degradation in urban and natural forests.

Why Green Waste Management Matters

Wood-boring beetles, fungal pathogens, and other harmful organisms can persist in cut wood long after a tree has been pruned or removed. If infested material is left on-site or transported without precautions, these pests can spread to

healthy trees, exacerbating infestations and potentially causing significant economic and environmental damage.

A key example is the invasive shothole borers, tiny beetles that burrow into trees and spread a pathogenic fungus, leading to tree decline and mortality. Invasive shothole borers affect a wide range of tree species, including sycamores, box elders, and oaks. The primary pathway these beetles use to move long distances and infest new areas is through the transportation of unmanaged green waste and firewood. Similarly, the goldspotted oak borer, another invasive beetle, has caused the death of hundreds of thousands of oak trees in San Diego County alone. The continued spread of this infestation throughout Southern California has been largely linked to the movement of infested firewood.

Notable threats include the Asian longhorned beetle, syrex woodwasp, and emerald ash borer, all of which have been linked to the movement of infected plant material. Preventing the spread of these and other pests requires a proactive approach to green waste management. By adopting best practices, landscape

professionals can reduce risks and help protect urban and natural forests.

Best Management Practices for Green waste

1. Process Green Waste On-Site Whenever Possible

Chipping or grinding wood at the job site is the most effective way to minimize the spread of the pests. Infested wood chipped into small pieces no larger than one-inch would destroy most wood-boring insects inside. These chips can often be safely used as mulch within the same property, providing an environmentally friendly alternative to disposal.

2. Avoid Creating Pest Breeding Grounds in Staging Areas

Staging areas, where logs, branches, and other green waste accumulate before being processed, often become a source of pest infestations. As wood sits, invasive wood-boring pests begin dispersing from the cut logs and infesting surrounding trees. Quickly disposing of green waste prevents pests from spreading. Whenever possible, schedule green waste removal on the same day as tree work. If infested material must be stored for short periods,



Above: This oak tree was killed by goldspotted oak borers. Proper green waste management is crucial to prevent the spread of this destructive pest to healthy trees.

PHOTO CREDIT: BEATRIZ NOBUIA-BEHRMANN, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION.

it should be tightly covered with a tarp to reduce the potential spread of invasive pests.

3. Dispose of Infested Material Properly

If green waste cannot be processed on-site, it should be taken to an approved disposal facility that can safely manage infested material. Many regions have specific sites designated for handling wood waste that may contain invasive pests, such as composting centers or biomass facilities, which professionals can find, by searching California Biomass Energy Alliances Facility Map online. It is important to check local regulations, as some areas have restrictions on the movement of potentially infested wood.

4. Responsible Firewood Management

Untreated cut wood should not be left on the curbside for free pick-up, as there is no way to control where the wood is moved. If wood is to be left with the landowner, they should be informed about the risks of spreading invasive pests through infested firewood. Users should be encouraged to source firewood locally to prevent the unintentional spread of pests and diseases.

5. Educate Landscape Crews and Clients

Awareness is a critical component of pest management. Field crews should be trained to recognize the signs of pest infestation in wood, understand proper disposal methods, and implement best management practices. Taking the time to help the client understand the importance of incorporating green waste management precautions into the job ensures they recognize the benefits of responsible disposal and the potential risks of improper handling.

A Responsible Approach to Green Waste

Green waste is an unavoidable aspect of tree care, but its management should not be an afterthought. A well-planned



Above: Pictured is the removal of a Casuarina tree infested with invasive shothole borers. Proper disposal like chipping and composting of the infested wood is necessary to prevent the spread.

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green waste strategy helps prevent the spread of destructive pests, supports healthy landscapes, and reduces long-term management costs. The Former Executive Director of the Association of Compost Producers, Dan Noble, explains, "One of the main reasons to compost is to reduce the spread of pests. By utilizing chipping and grinding methods some pests, particularly large organisms, like Asian citrus psyllid, and some microorganisms, can be somewhat reduced. However, to greatly reduce, or eliminate most pests, the chipped or ground green material should be composted. Composting is a Process to 'Further Reduce Pathogens' (PFRP) method to reduce pathogens in organic waste, by ensuring the compost reaches and maintains high temperatures for a duration, effectively killing harmful microorganisms in the green material." By making informed choices today, we can prevent irreversible damage to our urban and natural forests, preserving their ecological and economic value for future generations. **LCMP**

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