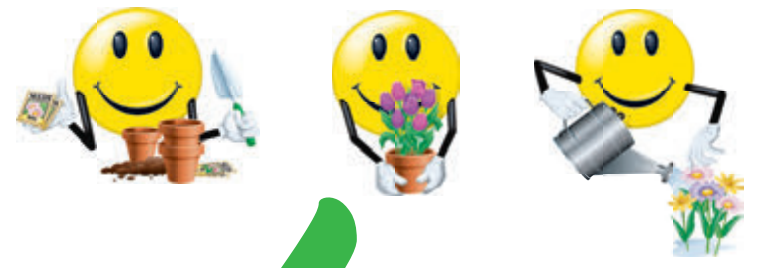


# HOME



# & garden

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## In the fall garden

Welcome to fall, arguably the best time of year to be a gardener. There's a crisp quality to the air, the sky seems bluer, and the cooler mornings are great for getting those fall tasks done. So what needs your attention in the garden this time of year?

### Quitman Arboretum

Don't spend all your fall days working in the garden - take time to enjoy the beauty triggered by fall rains and cooler nights. If you look across Wood County, you'll find many plants showing off their blooms and berries; these are some that can be found at the Quitman Arboretum:

The blooms of native perennials such as Maximilian sunflowers, goldenrod, and asters provide nectar in the fall for pollinators like bees, butterflies and hummingbirds. Many varieties of salvia are once again in full bloom, with blues and reds and purples dominating the landscape. You can hear

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annuals like poppies, larkspur, or bluebonnets, scatter the seeds on bare soil, tamp in, and water gently to settle the seeds. You should see some growth before winter, followed by blooms in the spring.

And if you want a display of spring bulbs like tulips and daffodils, it's time to buy - but wait a bit before planting. Tulip bulbs will require 45 days of pre-chilling in a refrigerator (away from fruit as it may reduce blooms); some bulb companies sell them pre-chilled

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**Planting:** Fall is the best time for planting trees, shrubs, and hardy perennials, as they'll grow roots most of the winter since our ground does not freeze. Remember when planting trees and shrubs to dig a wide, shallow hole - you're planting these, not burying them - and position the transplant no deeper than it was in the container (shallow is better). Backfill with the soil taken from the hole, and water in well. Cover the root ball with two to three inches of mulch to protect roots during the winter; keep mulch away from the trunk to avoid pests and rot. Keep your new plants watered weekly through fall.

Story and photos  
by Lin Grado

Now is also the time to select and plant your cool-season annuals - mums, marigolds, pansies, ornamental kale, etc. - for months of blooms. To ensure a good show of color through the fall, plant in soil amended with compost, then mulch them and water them in. Keep them watered if Mother Nature fails to provide fall rain. If your garden dreams include spring



ABOVE: Fall-planted tulips at the Quitman Arboretum in Quitman in the spring. LEFT: Maximilian sunflowers. BELOW: Avoid pruning spring-blooming shrubs in the fall. (Photos by Lin Grado)



## Home improvement projects for your fall to-do-list

Homeowners know that maintaining a home can be a year-round job. No home is immune to wear and tear, and homeowners who want to protect their real estate investments should try to stay two steps ahead to ensure their homes do not succumb to the elements or become outdated and unappealing to prospective buyers.

Fall has become a season that's synonymous with home improvement, but homeowners need not wait until the leaves begin changing colors to start planning their next projects. The following are a few items homeowners can add to their fall home improvement to-do lists.

### ROOF INSPECTION

Less precipitation tends to fall dur-



Autumn is a great time to inspect patios that might have endured some wear and tear during the heavy usage seasons of spring and summer.

ing the warmer months than during the late fall and winter. As a result, homeowners may not be aware of leaky roofs until autumn has come and gone. But waiting until winter to inspect the roof can prove disastrous, as weather conditions will not be conducive to inspection and increased precipitation may result in potentially costly damage.

Leaky roofs can be easily identified by looking for water stains on interior ceilings. Once you see a stain, you can climb onto the roof to identify the location of the leak and fix it before winter rains and snowfall turn the problem into something much larger. Inspect your ceilings for signs of leaking after a strong rainfall, and then address any

See TO-DO-LIST, Page 3D



## Get the facts on going solar

Solar energy is gaining traction, particularly among homeowners who are realizing that the sun's rays can be used to power to their homes, businesses and cars while benefitting both the planet and their bottom lines.

The Solar Energy Industries Association says that, with more than 135,000 installations in the first half of 2015, nearly 784,000 U.S. homes and businesses have now gone solar and a new solar project was installed every two minutes. There are now more than 22,700 MW of cumulative solar electric capacity operating in the United States, enough to power more than 4.6 million American homes. The government of Canada says wind power and solar photovoltaic energy are the fastest growing sources of electricity in Canada.

Recognizing that solar energy has so many cost benefits and so much potential in protecting natural resources, more and more homeowners are investigating the idea of installing solar energy systems in their homes. The following are some things homeowners should consider as they ponder whether or not to install solar energy in their homes.



- Ideally, panels should face the southwest, but the direction of the panels isn't as important as you might think. Panels can face various directions with acceptable results. Homeowners should not let the layout of their properties deter them from installing solar energy.

- The addition of solar panels should not adversely affect the assessment value of a home, nor increase property taxes.

- According to SolarEnergy, a resource on residential solar products, there may be different "tiers" of usage that determine utility companies' rates concerning energy. The top tier may be removed from the billing formula when solar power is used in con-

junction with an electric energy provider. Speak with a utility company representative to learn more.

- Assess just how much energy you will need to determine which solar options will be available to you. In addition, make other changes around the house to reduce energy consumption, such as putting HVAC systems on timers, shutting off lights when leaving rooms, opening the drapes to let in more natural light, and replacing traditional light bulbs with more efficient alternatives.

Solar energy can be a viable option for homeowners looking to curtail costs and do their part to preserve the planet's natural resources.

## Turn yard waste into gardener's gold - compost

By Melinda Myers

Save time and money by turning landscape trimmings into a valuable soil amendment.

The idea is simple, just collect disease- and insect-free plant debris into a heap and let it decompose into a fine, nutrient rich material that helps improve the soil. Don't add meat, dairy, invasive plants, weeds that have gone to seed or perennial weeds that can take root and grow in your compost pile.

Speed things up by layering yard waste with soil or compost, adding a bit of fertilizer to each layer and moistening to a consistency of a damp sponge. Further speed up the process by making the pile at least three-feet tall and wide.

Turn the pile as time allows, moving the more decomposed materials from the center to the outside of the pile. It's a great work out and speeds up the decomposition. The more effort you put into composting the sooner you have rich organic matter for your garden.

Build the pile in a location that is convenient for adding raw materials and harvesting the finished

compost. Consider placing the pile near a water source to make moistening the pile easier. Avoid poorly drained locations that may lead to the pile of compost becoming waterlogged. Soggy materials break down more slowly and may smell.

Enclose the pile in a bin to keep the process neat and tidy. Purchase a compost bin or make your own from fencing, concrete reinforcement wire or old heat-treated pallets.

Single bin wire composters are easy to assemble and move. Enclosed bins keep materials out of sight and neighbors or less enthusiastic family members happy. Look for bins of sturdy UV resistant materials, ventilation for efficient composting and designed for easy loading and unloading.

Tumbler composters are great for small spaces and make loading, unloading and turning much easier. The closed system also keeps out rodents, wildlife and pets. Add garden waste, keep it consistently moist and give it a turn. Continually adding fresh material slows the process, but you will still end up with good compost. Speed up decomposition with two tumblers. Fill one

tumbler with plant waste and let it cook, while collecting fresh materials in the second..

And don't let cold temperatures or a lack of space stop you. Everyone can convert kitchen scraps into nutrient-rich compost with the help of red worms. Convert a plastic container filled with shredded paper into a home for the worms and place to recycle plant based food scraps. Or dress things up with a stylish bin like the green Worm Farm Composter and move the worms indoors for convenient recycling.

Add finished compost to your vegetable and annual gardens every spring to help build healthy soil and a productive and beautiful garden. Or spread a one-inch layer over the soil surface of perennials gardens every year or two to keep your flowers looking their best.

As you clear out the summer garden, put all that green debris to work. Convert it to rich compost for next year's garden. Then enjoy the many benefits it will have on your landscape.

*Melinda Myers has more than 30 years of horticulture experience and has written over 20 gardening books, including Small Space Gardening.*

## Five tips to make an older home more energy efficient

(MS) — While new homes are being built to be more energy efficient than ever before, thanks to a growing green building movement and increasingly strict building codes, the age of existing dwellings continues to present challenges. More than 40 percent of the housing stock in the United States was built before 1969 and simply wouldn't stand up to today's standards. Yet, much can be done to help homeowners improve their building envelope to reduce energy use and increase efficiency.

Improving your home's energy efficiency can help save money, keep you more comfortable, reduce pollution, and prevent global warming. Try these five simple measures to maximize the energy efficiency of your home:

1. Seal cracks and gaps around your home's windows, doors, and vents. These can be a considerable source of energy loss, allowing conditioned air to escape and unconditioned air to infiltrate your home, placing stress on your furnace and air conditioner in the process. An

easy DIY solution is to caulk around windows, doors, and vents, and install or replace worn weatherstripping. An average home loses up to 30 percent of its energy through air leaks, so sealing your home is a worthwhile exercise.

2. Top up or replace old insulation in your attic. A poorly insulated attic is a primary source of energy loss. Also, over time, some types of insulation can settle and compact, allowing heat to escape through gaps. Experts recommend installing a dimensionally stable batt insulation like a Roxul product called Comfortbatt. Aim for an r-value of at least R-50, or a depth of roughly 16 inches.

3. Insulate basement headers. Uninsulated basement headers are common, especially in older homes. They can act as a gateway for heated air to escape. Fixing the problem is fast and easy. Simply cut Comfortbatt stone wool insulation to fit the cavity and compress into place. Doing this throughout your basement will prevent heat loss and can potentially save hundreds of



Insulation is key to energy efficiency.

dollars each year.

4. Switch to LED light bulbs. Some LED light bulbs have a lifespan of up to 10 years, and are 80 to 90 percent more efficient than incandescent bulbs. They are generally more environmentally friendly than CFLs and safer, too, since they produce less heat. The return on investment is excellent, as LED bulbs

often pay for themselves through energy savings within the first year.

5. Consider a home energy audit. This will help you identify and target specific problematic areas of energy loss. A professional home energy audit will also provide a list of recommended solutions to help you maximize your energy-efficiency strategy.

## Pathogens, insects in line to cause post oak decline

By KATHLEEN PHILLIPS

In the lush green landscape of a season with plentiful rain, memories of the record Texas drought of 2011 could fade. But hundreds of calls, emails and tree samples sent to the Texas Plant Diagnostic Lab in College Station tell a different story.

"Since the early spring to late summer, there have been many inquiries as to why post oaks have 'suddenly' died," said Dr. Kevin Ong, director of the lab, which is operated by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.

"When you get a whole bunch of folks asking the same question, and they are from all over Texas – even in the Panhandle – you know that something widespread is up."

What's up is that leaves start yellowing, may develop spots and ultimately turn brown but still cling to the tree limbs, according to Sheila McBride, the lab's lead diagnostician. At that point, the tree is already dead.

"We are seeing the symptoms everywhere. It's in the urban environment. It's in the rangeland environment. It's in the woodland environment. It's not just happening in one spot," she said.

McBride said a few cases were reported in 2011 and again in 2013, mostly from arborists checking trees in their areas. But the flood of calls this year, beginning in the spring when post oaks should be bursting into a showy display of green leaves, was an alarm for plant pathologists who monitor diseases and other stresses that impact Texas flora.

McBride and Dr. David Appel, Texas A&M AgriLife Research forest pathologist in College Station, call the phenomenon rapid oak decline. But they agree that "rapid" is in the eye of the beholder and that by the time someone notices the symptoms – the yellowing, spotted or brown leaves on a tree – the tree has been declining over time.

"People will say the tree died overnight. But actually it has been developing these early symptoms for a long time before that. It collapses. It dies. It turns completely brown very quickly," Appel said.

Especially hard hit is the Post Oak Savannah region of Texas, which is between the blackland prairies and the eastern pineywoods. According to the Texas A&M Forest Service, the area extends from the Oklahoma border to south of San Antonio and was part of the historic oak belt that once ranged from near Canada to Central America.

Appel, who has researched oak wilt for decades, stressed that the current problem is not that disease. Oak wilt targets primarily live oaks whereas this situation is impacting post oaks, which are very resistant to the wilt.

To understand why post oaks are declining, he explained, one needs to understand their ecology. Post oaks are a type of white oaks, which are "very, very susceptible to site disruption and rapid environmental changes.

"They have particular areas where they like to grow, but as they get older and bigger, the stand gets more crowded. That means the competition for resources gets to be a problem," Appel said. "So when we go through rapid environmental extremes from year to year, that makes for a tough time on the post oak physiology."

That's why plant pathologists peg the 2011 drought as the beginning of the decline of so many post oaks in Texas. Following the drought, several years of unusual weather patterns made it hard for the large, old post oaks to compete for the carbohydrates they need to live.

"Then this year included an extremely wet spring followed by a very hot, dry period," Appel said. "Those two factors combined with the stress that was put on these trees in 2011 to cause the death of so many post oaks this year."

Further complicating the situation is that no one pathogen is responsible, so there are few treatments available to reverse the decline, he noted. Thus, while several trees in one stand may die, it is not from a pathogen spreading but because the area is ripe for the condition.

"We have a perfect storm of environmental conditions," Appel said. "The tree's physiology is weakened by the drought and weather extremes, and then we get what we call contributors – canker-causing pathogens, root rot pathogens and insect borers. We believe that that is what's really leading the problem with the post oaks."

Appel said all of these situations have been found in any given year on post oaks for decades, but the mortality rate has been much higher and more widespread this year.

Whether something can be done about it depends on each situation.

"You have to look at what the specific site conditions are," he said. "In an urban environment, there may be ways to make up for the environmental extremes that have been happening. It may be useful to water the trees occasionally but only every three or four weeks at most.

He said too much water can be as harmful as drought because water accumulating around the base of a tree can encourage root rot organisms.

"A tree should be allowed to dry out very nicely and stay dry, because post oaks hate to have wet feet," Appel said.

He said other possible aids in urban areas include not letting turf grow to the base of the tree to avoid having to water it, or try vertical mulching by drilling holes (in the ground) around the base and extend beyond the drip line of the tree. Then fill the holes with organic matter that allows the soil to dry out and encourages the growth of the roots in the immediate vicinity of these holes.

In rural woodland areas, there are fewer options, he said.





Photos courtesy of Getty Images

## FAMILY FEATURES

With the aid of modern technology, it's now possible to convert virtually any ordinary house into a smart home filled with features that make daily tasks more convenient. These technologies allow for greener living, customization of your living space to personal tastes and the peace of mind that you can control key home systems with your smartphone.

Converting to a smart home may seem like an intimidating task at first, but if you break the process into manageable steps you'll find it's not so hard to choose and install the best smart devices for your home and lifestyle. You can begin turning your house into a smart home by following these three simple steps.

**Set a budget.**

All of the technology and gadgetry that comprise today's smart homes were once viewed as luxury, reserved for the rich and famous and those whose lives played out on the big screen. What once seemed impractical for the average homeowner is now quite attainable. When you consider that some smart devices, such as light bulbs, have a life span of up to 25 years, in the end you may end up even saving money.

How much money you'll ultimately spend to create your smart home depends on numerous factors: the size of your home, number of systems and appliances you wish to automate and the level of integration you desire are significant considerations. Assuming that your home is already wired for a high-performance broadband connection, you can get into the smart home game for under \$100 with a thermostat that you can manage remotely. On the other hand, adding smart-home technology throughout the

whole house will likely cost in the thousands.

Pay attention to the levels of integration various products offer. Purchasing products from brands that partner with many other smart-home device makers will help ensure the products you add in the future will work with those you install now. Selecting highly integrated products will save you time during the installation process, help you avoid unnecessary expenses down the road and improve your overall smart-home experience.

**Brainstorm ideas for each room.**

Once you're past the nuts and bolts of practical considerations, it's time to start imagining. The key about designing the perfect smart home for you is to remember that the very essence of smart

# Starting Your SMART HOME Transformation

devices is their ability to make your life more convenient. Choosing the products and how you connect them is all about you and your lifestyle – there's more than just one way to build your smart home.

Go room to room in your home and think about the activities that occur in each space. Consider which of these can become easier or more enjoyable with the support of smart technology. The living room, where you likely have a host of entertainment and audio equipment, offers plenty of obvious benefits, but also look at the kitchen, for example. Did you forget to start the dishwasher on your way out the door? Initiating a wash cycle remotely will

let you come home to dishes clean and ready for dinner.

**Prioritize what you install.**

When it's time to begin the actual transition to a smart home, it's a good idea to start with the most important products first. For most homeowners, those are the devices that you use every day.

Opening and closing the garage door is so much a part of your daily routine that it is often hard to remember if you closed it on the way out. Products such as the Chamberlain MyQ Garage upgrade kit, or Chamberlain garage door openers with built-in MyQ technology, put peace of mind in the palm of your hand. This technology allows you to control and check the status of your garage door from anywhere, at any time, so you know if your garage was left open or if it's being opened while you're not there. The innovative technology works with numerous

smart-device brands and their devices, such as NEST thermostats and Xfinity home security products. Learn more at [chamberlain.com](http://chamberlain.com).

With the all-important lead-in to your home covered, you can turn attention to devices that help manage your home's operation and efficiency. Thermostats that auto adjust to designated climate settings are a popular option for many homeowners because they bring immediate returns in reducing your overall energy usage. Irrigation systems and power management products are also wise investments when it comes to optimizing your home's use of natural resources.

Stepping across the threshold to a smart home may feel like a big step, but once you get settled and experience the convenience and control, you'll likely find yourself exploring ways to incorporate smart technology every place you can.

## SMART DEVICES FOR EVERY ROOM

The number of devices that can be integrated into a smart home is growing at an accelerated rate, but not all are complex gadgets and gizmos. Some of the simpler options for every room in your home include:

**Living Room: Outlet Adapters**

Walk into your home late at night and flip on the lights, the TV or both without searching in the dark for a switch or remote. After your smart outlet adapter is plugged into the wall, appliances can be plugged into the adapter and controlled from a smartphone.

**Bedroom: Motorized Drapes**

Adding motorized drapes to your bedroom allows for an easy way to adjust lighting and privacy – all without leaving the comfort of your

bed. Properly adjusting drapes, which is easy to do with smartphone control, can also help manage energy consumption by regulating solar heat.

**Kitchen: Coffee Maker**

Wake up to your favorite morning beverage without drowsily scooping and pouring. A smart coffee maker can make the right amount of coffee at just the right time through simple settings on your smartphone.

**Garage: Remote Garage Door Access**

Open, close and monitor your garage door anywhere, anytime, with MyQ technology from Chamberlain. With remote access to one of the main entry points to your home, you can ensure the garage door is shut when you're out or ready to open when you return.



## To-do-list

From page 1D

leaks immediately.

**GUTTER CLEANING**

While some homeowners prefer to delay their gutter cleaning projects until late fall, those whose homes are surrounded by trees may need to schedule two such projects. Gutters clogged with leaves and other debris can cause serious roof damage, and that damage can extend all the way inside a home. In addition,

clogged gutters make great nesting areas for insects or critters. Always stand on a ladder when cleaning gutters, wearing gloves to remove items by hand and dropping leaves and debris into a trash can below. Standing on the roof and leaning over gutters greatly increases your risk of injury.

If the gutters are clear when you first examine them in early fall, you can wait until later in the season to give them a complete and thorough cleaning.

Once you have finished clearing the gutters, you

can use a hose to run water through them and the downspouts to confirm everything is functioning properly.

**WINDOW AND DOORWAY INSPECTION**

Before temperatures start dropping once again, homeowners will want to inspect their windows and doorways for leaks. Over time, cracks can develop around windows and doorways, and while such cracks are rarely noticeable when the weather outside is warm, they can be quite obvious and very costly if they remain unsealed come the start of winter. Cold air can enter a

home through cracks around windows and doorways, and many homeowners who don't suspect leaks may respond by turning up the thermostats in their homes. That can prove quite expensive over a full winter. Choose a windy autumn day to place a hand by windows and external doorways in your home to see if you can feel drafts. If you can, seal these cracks as soon as possible.

**PATIO CLEANUP**

Patios are popular hangouts during spring and summer, and that can result in a lot of

wear and tear. Once you store patio furniture for the winter, inspect your entire patio to determine if it needs any refurbishing. While certain patio projects may be best left for spring, you can still clean any stained areas around the grill and look for cracks in the sidewalk that need to be addressed.

Preparing for fall home improvement projects ahead of time can help homeowners complete projects in a timely manner and ensures they won't be forced to brave the winter elements when refurbishing their homes.





Pansies and chrysanthemums are amply stocked at local nurseries and are fall favorites of gardeners. They do well in the cool weather and provide welcome splashes of color. **BELOW:** Pink muhly grass.

## Fall

From page 1D

for a fee. Tulip bulbs can be planted late November through January for March blooms; treat them as annuals. Daffodils can be planted when you buy them, but the optimal time is between Election Day and Christmas.

Many daffodils will perennialize in Texas - but generally not the large trumpet daffodils that are sold at big-box stores. Varieties such as 'Avalanche' or 'Grand Primo' that are commercially available can still be seen growing around old homesteads, and many bulb vendors offer hybrids of the sweet-smelling jonquils that enliven our Wood County roads in March. There are other spring bulbs that do well in Texas, such as grape hyacinths, summer snowflakes, and Spanish bluebells. Plant

your bulbs pointy-end up, and three to six inches deep.

For additional recommendations and instructions on planting, visit the volunteer gardeners who are at the Quitman Arboretum on Wednesday mornings.

**Mulching:** If you're going to do one thing in a Texas garden, it should be mulching. Organic mulches such as straw, hardwood bark, and shredded leaves will improve the soil over time, but more immediately will reduce erosion, retain soil moisture, and insulate the plants from low temperatures. Get your mulch by the truckload or by the bag, and spread a two- to four-inch layer in your beds. At the Quitman Arboretum, volunteers first put down a layer of wet cardboard or several sheets of moistened newspaper, then add the mulch. This keeps light from reaching the ground and prevents many weed seeds

## Arboretum

From page 1D

the buzzing of bees as they work the blooms of these long-blooming plants.

Ornamental grasses, which thrive in full sun and poor soil - are starting to bloom. Pink muhly grass sports spectacular clouds of pink flowers that float above spiky foliage, while maiden hair grass has tassel-like blooms that move gracefully with the slightest breeze.

from germinating. Keep the mulch away from the base of trees and shrubs to prevent disease and decay.

**Pruning:** If you like a tidy garden during the winter, cut back your perennials after the first frost. I practice 'chop and drop' pruning - I cut the stems off in a bundle and then chop them in small pieces, letting them fall to the ground to act as mulch. Don't do this with diseased plants or plants that have had insect dam-

age - it's best to put those in a hot compost pile or the trash, to reduce problems the next year. If you have plants with seed heads like sunflowers or coneflowers, you may opt to leave those in place during the winter for the birds and prune in

early spring. Ornamental grasses should be pruned in mid-to-late January, before the new growth starts. Do not prune trees or shrubs in the fall - it may stimulate tender new growth that can be killed by a frost. Instead, wait till trees and shrubs

have gone dormant for the winter before pruning. Skip the winter pruning for shrubs that bloom in the spring like camellias or azaleas - you'll cut off all the buds and sacrifice your spring blooms.

Soon winter will be upon us, and our gardens will be put to bed for the year. If you follow the tips above, your plants will emerge next spring healthy and you'll impress your neighbors with your horticultural skill.

Lin is a volunteer gardener at the Quitman Arboretum and Botanical Gardens, 100 Governor Hogg Parkway in Quitman. You can join her to work in the gardens any Wednesday at 9 a.m., and learn tips, tricks, and techniques to turn your garden into a showcase.



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## Post oak

From page 2D

"There's really very little we can do about this. When you see these trees dying off, if it's a forest management situation, we may suggest thinning of the stand because if you remove the weakened individuals it may help the others have more available nutrients," Appel said. "The idea is to increase resources for all the remaining trees. These things might help, but it's probably not really practical."

For now, he said, tree owners should hope for a good dose of the right weather conditions to help remaining healthy trees replenish their nutritional needs.

"As we near the end of the growing season, all the trees are going to start showing symptoms of defoliation and will look very much like the sick trees. So at the end of the summer when you see a tree that is changing colors, you don't want to assume that you've got the rapid decline of post oak. The best thing to do is to wait until the following spring and see if that tree leafs out again.

"Next spring, see what the state of the health of the trees is and if you really think the tree is in trouble, then you need to start considering some possible treatments," Appel said.