

Farewell, oleander

Bug ravages stubborn shrub, but not everyone is mourning

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When the oleanders began dying around the homes of John and Chris VanDenburgh and their neighbors, the couple didn't waste a lot of time mourning.

The gracious, towering hedge - as high as 30 feet - has been downed by the lethal oleander leaf scorch disease, which nearly wiped out the plant in Riverside, Calif.

Some say, "Good riddance." The ubiquitous flowering shrub is not only non-native, but nothing, until now, has been able to kill it. That means it grows. Everywhere. And it sinks python-size roots into the ground that can destroy underground pipes and require a backhoe to remove.

Although the oleander grows fast and tall with little water, loves scorching heat and resists frost, a bacteria-carrying insect is downing the plant that so many people love to hate.

There's no treatment for the disease, caused by a bacterium that's carried to the plants by the obliging smoke tree sharpshooter, a 1/4-inch gray insect common in the Valley. The bacterium penetrates the plant's vascular system, crippling the plant's ability to transport water to its outer branches.

Mary Olsen, plant pathologist for the University of Arizona's Department of Plant Sciences, first investigated the disease in Phoenix about three years ago.

Oleanders that for nearly 40 years had provided a natural barrier among neighbors, churches, schools, parks and businesses between Seventh Avenue and Seventh Street from Camelback Road north began inexplicably dying.

The disease, which mostly has stayed confined to the north-central Phoenix area, according to horticulturist Terry Mikel, has wiped out nearly all of the oleanders on Wilder Road, where the VanDenburghs live.

Which is why the VanDenburghs and others find themselves in search of a plant to replace what to many seemed like the ideal natural screen.

Some residents have trimmed the huge hedges in the hope they'll rebound, but once infected, there's no hope for the plant to revive, says Mikel, horticulturist with the University of Arizona's Maricopa County Cooperative Extension program. Indeed, Mikel says, trimming infected oleanders can increase the potential for spreading the disease.

"Once you get a positive diagnosis, it's best to take them out."

Phoenicians have a hard time accepting the fact that the heretofore indestructible oleander could succumb to bacteria carried by an insect the size of long-grain rice.

Mikel sympathizes with the loss.

"Nothing in any realm can come close for size, speed of growth, color, luxuriant foliage, heat resistance, frost resistance, low water usage," he says, enumerating oleanders' qualities.

"It's why most people planted them, because they do really, really well here."

But Kirti Mathura, curator of shrubs for Desert Botanical Garden, doesn't share Mikel's sadness at the loss of the oleander.

This is the time to landscape the Valley with more native plants, Mathura says.

"People weren't open to using native plants," she says.

Heat-tolerant, desert-dwelling native plants such as the hopbush have a nice, elongated, glossy leaf like the oleander but are less messy.

They can reach up to 15 feet in height and 8 to 10 feet in width and, unlike the oleander, won't establish a root system that requires a backhoe to remove.

Mathura also recommends Arizona rosewood, which grows more slowly than the oleander but which can reach 20 feet tall and is extremely drought-tolerant and maintenance-free.

The VanDenburghs' acre lot, which receives flood irrigation, is one of many in the north-central corridor and could serve as a kind of micro-environment that, Mikel says, could be hospitable to the smoke tree sharpshooter, and thus make the oleanders in this area more vulnerable to the leaf scorch disease.

He wouldn't recommend planting more oleanders here.

Neither would Matt Gonshorowski, partner of Treeline Design Group Inc. and a landscape designer, who

suggests a variety of screening plants that are fast-growing, heat- and frost-tolerant, and capable of reaching if not 30 feet, at least a height that hides the backyard shed and shields patios from neighbors.

In addition to some trees that will turn in the fall, the VanDenburghs chose dwarf myrtle, Japanese privet and

a couple of Carolina cherry laurels.

Although no cure for leaf scorch disease is on the horizon, Mikel remains hopeful.

"Things don't get out of balance very long. I have a lot of faith in nature."