

**COASTAL GARDENER**  
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**Q:** The coast live oaks in my area are showing increasingly brown leaves. There is no new green leaf formation. Could this be sudden oak death syndrome?

**A:** I have discussed your oak concerns with an oak woodlands specialist. She mentioned several possible causes of the “browning leaves” problem. First I should say that there is no reported incidence of disease that is affecting the oak populations of south Santa Barbara County. You are correct in saying that Sudden Oak Death (SOD) has not been diagnosed in SB County. I will add, however, that there is always a chance of the “first case!” If you study SOD information, you will note that SOD-infected trees have oozing cankers on the limbs and trunk besides the leaf death symptoms. So you need to look for a suite of symptoms to make a positive SOD diagnosis.

Several things happened in 2006 that may be all or part of the oak problem. One: There are areas of SB County that are short on rainfall. Drought conditions can cause oaks to go through a natural leaf shed and twig death process as the tree(s) adjusts to the lack of adequate water. Two: Oak moth was severe in some locations in the spring/early summer of 2006. Defoliation by the oak moth larvae put heavy stress on some oaks and may account for the trees going into an early dormancy this fall/winter. Three: In landscape situations, excess watering during the summer months can stress oak trees. In this instance the fungus *Armillaria mellea* may contribute to the decline of an oak tree or group of oaks. There are also other root and foliage pathogens and insects that may be part of the decline complex. Four: Jumping oak gall injury can cause oak leaves to brown, usually in a blotchy pattern and drop early. Five: There are several oak twig blight diseases that will cause early browning and leaf death. However, these usually kill small clumps of leaves scattered over the canopy.

California oaks are very old in terms of their presence in geological time, therefore, many insects, fungi, bacteria and other microbes have developed

symbiotic relationships with these trees. Not all the relationships are beneficial to the oaks, however.

My suggestion is to culture or care for “affected” trees in a manner that is as close to their native environment as possible. If the coming winter rains are short, some supplemental watering may be in order in the spring. A light addition of nutrients as the trees leaf out next spring may also help stimulate recovery growth.

However, summer/fall watering of oaks should be minimal or avoided all together.

I have a leaflet on the care of urban oaks. This leaflet presents a short write-up on the care of and problems found in oaks. It may give you some other clues as to what is happening in your oak population. This publication is available for \$1.50 plus tax (total \$1.61) from your Cooperative Extension Office.

Send your landscape and garden questions to: **The Coastal Gardener, 624-A West Foster Road, Santa Maria, CA 93455.**