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# Invasive beetle threat

KAREN WATKINS

It's as tiny as a flea, but the polyphagous shot hole borer beetle is laying waste to forests of mighty trees around the world, and now it's headed this way. It might already be in your garden.

The bug has been chewing away at Johannesburg's green lungs, and scientists fear it could soon start doing the same here, not only changing city streetscapes but attacking fruit trees and threatening farms and nature reserves.

Last week, over 100 arborists, landscapers, retailers, growers, ecologists, compost and soil suppliers and Lourensford and Vergelegen wine estates met to discuss how best to ward off the beetle.

They urged Capetonians to check their trees and raise the alarm should they spot the beetle.

The shot hole has shown a preference for oaks, most willows, plane trees, avocado, some acacias and most maples, according to Altus de Wet of the City's recreation and parks.

According to professors Wilhelm de Beer and Francois Roets, of the Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute (FABI), most borer beetles live in dead wood, but this ambrosia beetle



■ Francois Krige, Professor Wilhelm de Beer, Chandre Rhoda, Altus de Wet, Professor Francois Roets and Paul Barker.

does not eat wood. Instead, it burrows into living trees, establishing brood galleries where it lays its eggs. It introduces a fungus (*fusarium euwallaceae*) which becomes

food for developing larvae and adult beetles.

This fungus blocks the water-conducting tissues of the tree and ultimately causes its death.

Professor De Beer said that by the time the beetles and fungus had killed a large tree, it could be home to thousands of beetles and when they emerged, the females

could fly up to three kilometres and attack surrounding trees.

"They're unstoppable, but good management can reduce the impact," said Professor Roets.

"The beetle is sensitive to heat, therefore, the best method of eradication is to remove infested branches. Either burn these immediately or cut into smaller pieces, place in sealed refuse bags and leave in direct sunlight so the heat will kill the larvae and the insect," he said.

Other municipalities have been slow to introduce control measures. However, the City of Cape Town's Invasive Species Unit has introduced a management protocol.

Programme manager Chandre Rhoda said they had received 80 sightings of which 21 affected trees had been removed.

"It's critical that these beetles are not spread during removal. The project contains the biomass and treats tools used in the removal process. The wood is chipped onsite and incinerated," said Ms Rhoda, adding that the City was creating awareness through Friends and hack groups.

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