



What's not to Lichen?

Nature displays many examples of dissimilar organisms working together for mutual benefit. Lichen is one of them. Some varieties are more beautiful and interesting than others, but all demonstrate the cooperative effort of two life forms - a fungi and an algae - to coexist. In this case, algae carries out photosynthesis by producing carbohydrates for the fungi, and the fungi provide a platform for algae growth.



Lichens generally favor moist situations and avoid bright light when becoming established. Lichen often form colonies on tree bark but are usually harmless to the tree. Their establishment and growth on declining tree trunks and branches has led many homeowners to believe that the lichen is killing the tree. Actually, as trees age, decline, and reach the end of their life cycle or become stressed from root damage or insect or disease attack, the smaller branches die back. As these branches die, the crown retracts, more sunlight penetrates the upper portions of the tree, and lichen that had become established begin to flourish. While it may appear the lichen is precipitating the dieback, it is simply taking advantage of the increased nutrient availability through more sunlight. So the older a tree gets, the greater the rate of lichen growth. With fewer leaves, more sunlight penetrates the upper portions of the tree and the lichen that had become established can begin to flourish.



Pruning the dead and dying branches of declining trees is necessary to reduce the risk of tree failure and remove lichen colonies on those dying branches. Pruning will also allow more light to shine on areas previously shaded. If those areas have lichen colonies already established, those colonies may also grow. In situations where lichen has become unsightly, perhaps on ornamental tree bark, there are chemicals that can control their growth. These are generally fungicides and algaecides that control the growth of lichen, when pruning of the declining branches does not appear to be sufficient.

