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What's That Round, Fuzzy, Knobby, Lumpy , , , (Pick one) . . . Thing on My Oak Tree?

We've all seen those funny looking knobby, fuzzy or smooth growths on our garden plants and trees. These are usually excessive growths or hypertrophies of plant tissue commonly known as galls.

Mainly caused by wasps, flies or Eriophyid mites, there are some 2000 types that will infect just oak trees alone. Of these, only two or three are harmful to our oaks. The gall-producing organism will usually infect those trees that bud out earliest.

Once you have galls, you probably always will—with some years being heavier than others. The only cure is to cut out the infected branches or, at the worst, cut the whole tree down. This is mostly just an esthetic problem, kind of like ball moss, where it does not damage the tree but causes great concern among homeowners. We often get calls on this problem on our hot line.



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Live Oak Gall Wasp © Edward S. Ross

The actual mechanism that causes the abnormal growth of plant tissue in galls is not well understood. It is thought that the insect produces a chemical which it injects into either the roots, stems or leaves of its host. The abnormal growth then walls off the invading insect and, in turn, gives it a cozy home to finish out its life cycle by providing both shelter and a food source. In the case of nitrogen-fixing nodules in the bean family, there is even a beneficial effect of gathering nitrogen around the roots thus enriching the soil and feeding the plant itself.

The important thing to remember is that, while unsightly or even alarming, galls are not usually going to damage your trees. Also important to keep in mind is that only ½ percent of all insect species are actually harmful.