

Avenue's oaks threatened by killer disease



■ After 200 years oak trees may disappear from the Avenue in the Company's Gardens in Cape Town.

JEAN LE MAY, Staff Reporter

THE oak trees lining the Avenue in Cape Town's historic Company Gardens are threatened by a killer disease and may be gradually replaced by other species over the next few years.

"The people of Cape Town may have to get used to the idea of no oak trees at all in the Avenue," said Michael Wingfield, professor of forest pathology at the University of the Free State.

Several oak trees were taken down last week as Professor Wingfield carefully chopped out samples of wood for laboratory analysis.

The most worrying aspect, said Alan Botes of the Cape Town City Council's parks department, was that most of the dying trees were planted only 20 years ago to replace oaks that died of disease or old age.

"We thought that replacing the old trees with other, harder oak species would ensure the survival of the oak avenue, but that hasn't happened," he said.

Mr Botes and his colleague, Gardens manager David Curran, agreed that the council hoped to keep the oak avenue as long as possible, but admitted that there had been discussions about other species of trees to replace the oaks.

Oaks were first planted in the avenue in 1795, just over 200 years ago. In Van Riebeeck's day the avenue was lined with orange and lemon trees, and in the following century by chestnut trees.

The oaks are being attacked by "a whole suite of diseases," said the professor.

"There appears to be a fungus, but we won't be sure until we've had the results of laboratory analysis.

"There may be ways of delaying or even stopping the spread of the disease."

He said it was coincidental that his visit to Cape Town was so soon after a British visitor was killed when a branch of an oak on the Buitenverwachting estate fell on him.

Professor Wingfield said there was "no way" in which the collapse of a tree could be predicted with certainty.

"Certain municipalities overseas have taken the extreme approach of cutting down all the trees in public places after accidents in which people were injured."