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How to care for trees with winter damage

(BLUE SPRINGS, MO - Feb. 22, 2007) Now's the time to survey your trees for signs of winter damage and take steps to ensure their survival. Generally, there are three types of winter damage to trees - desiccation, freezing and breakage.

Desiccation, or drying out, can be more damaging to evergreens such as pine, spruce, hemlock, yew, arborvitae and juniper, and less harmful to deciduous trees such as oak, maple, apple, peaches, etc. Evergreen leaves continue to transpire in the winter though at a lesser rate than in the summer. Winter winds can increase the rate of transpiration, causing the plant to dry out, particularly if the ground is frozen and the plants cannot take up more water. Desiccation could result in discolored or burned foliage or even plant death.

“Some cultural practices can reduce desiccation,” says Lala Kumar, University of Missouri Extension horticulture specialist. “The first one is mulching, which reduces water loss and soil heaving while allowing the roots a little more time to grow in the fall and take up moisture. The second one is deep watering. Trees should be watered deeply in the fall in preparation for the winter. Deep watering is also recommended during warm days in January, February and March.”

(more)

Freezing can result in bark splitting. During the winter or early spring, sharp temperature changes between day and night can freeze the water within the trunk causing it to explode or split open in a symptom referred to as frost crack. Frost cracks are also called southwest injury because this is the side of the tree most often affected. Bark splitting can occur on the trunk of the trees as well as on branches.

A related problem is winter sunscald. This type of injury occurs when the sun warms the tree bark during the day and then the bark rapidly cools after sunset. This results in bark splitting or cracking. Newly planted trees or young trees are more prone to trunk bark splitting. Painting the trunk white with latex paint, wrapping it with tree wrap or placing tree guards can prevent splitting in young trees. If the guard is used, it should be loose enough to allow air to flow through the space between the stem and the guard. Many types of wrap are available today. In absence of commercial tree wrap or guard, wrapping trunks with burlap can also protect them from bark splitting. Remove all wraps and guards in late spring to prevent girdling or insect damage. Don't fertilize newly planted trees late in the growing season, as this may promote new growth and predispose the tissue to bark splitting. Bark splitting not only affects growth and development of the plant, but also becomes the source of borer (insect) damage.

Breakage is usually caused by a combination of ice, snow or wind. The weight of ice and snow can break even larger and stronger branches, especially if the wind further taxes the plant's physical strength. Another cause of breakage is improper or forceful removal of ice and snow. Frozen limbs are very brittle and snap easily if they bend the wrong way. Avoid physical removal of ice and snow from trees. Secondly, a proper pruning of trees could reduce the risk of breakage by ice and snow. Perhaps most importantly, select trees and varieties that are most suited to your area.

For more information, contact Lala Kumar, University of Missouri Extension horticultural specialist, at 816-252-5051 or kumarl@missouri.edu. The MU Guide to First Aid for Storm-damaged trees is available at extension.missouri.edu/explore/.

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