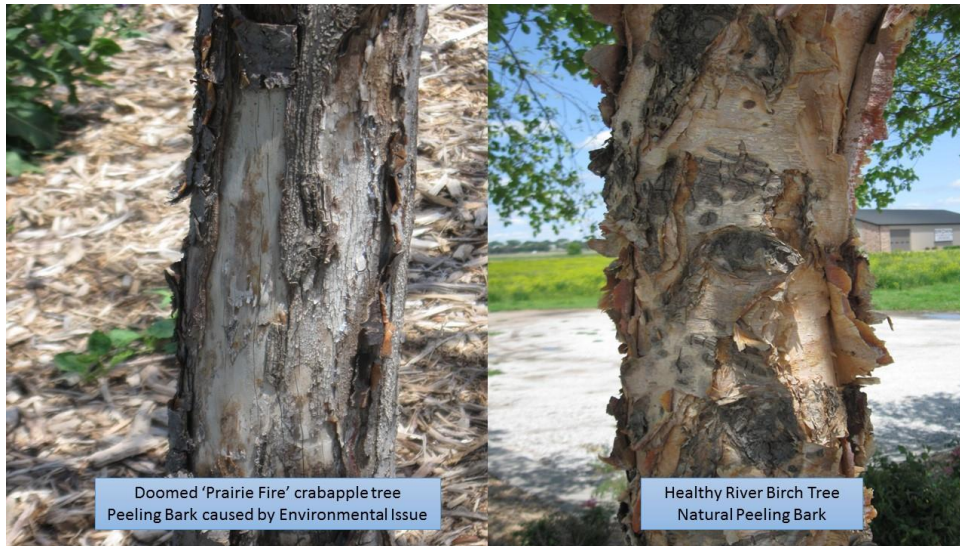


First, it was the willow trees; then the ornamental pears; and now, it's the crab apples, and particularly the 'Prairie Fire' crab apples. I've received innumerable calls from homeowners wanting to know what is happening to their 'Prairie Fire' crab apple trees. Their mutual comments have been, "My tree looks like it is dying. The bark is falling off. What can be done to save it?"

My response has generally been, "Nothing!" In most cases, it's too late.



While peeling bark on trees is not always a cause for concern, learning more about what causes bark to peel will certainly help one to understand the

issue better. If and when bark peels off a tree, it is extremely important to determine if the tree is undergoing a normal bark shedding process or if injury or disease has caused the problem.

If one can see bark covering the wood after the old bark peels away, the tree is likely undergoing a normal shedding process. If, however, one sees bare wood beneath the peeling bark, the tree is likely suffering from environmental or disease damage.

Interestingly, in many ways a tree's vulnerability and strength is only skin deep. Directly beneath the outer bark of a tree is the living tissue of that tree. For simplicity I will call that entire area the cambium layer. The cambium is the life line of a tree. Within this area, not only are new bark and wood cells created, but it is also the area where movement of water and nutrients takes place between the canopy of the tree and its root system. If the cambium is severely damaged, death of the entire tree will usually occur.

As a tree grows, generally its bark thickens, and the oldest outer bark falls off. It may crumble away slowly, but some trees have a more dramatic shedding process that is perfectly normal. Sycamore trees are prime examples of trees that undergo natural bark peel. Other natural peelers include birch, redbud, silver maple and Scotch pine.

Unfortunately, sometimes peeling bark is due to environmental factors. For example, when peeling bark on trees is limited to the south or southwest side of the tree and bare wood is exposed, the problem may be attributed to sunscald or frost damage. This type of shedding dramatically affects the health and/or lifespan of the tree.

Tree injury is rarely caused by an unusually cold winter. Damage generally occurs from extreme temperature fluctuations and the timing of these extremes during the dormant period and/or growing period. Trees that are not fully dormant can be stressed or injured by a sudden, hard freeze. Wild drops in temperature following mild weather can also cause injury to trees and other woody plants. Extended periods of mild winter weather can cause a tree to resume growth making them vulnerable to injury from rapid temperature drops. Unfortunately, trees do not show an immediate response to such injury; rather the symptoms of shedding bark are often delayed.

Witnessing bark sluffing off the trunk or major branches of a crab apple tree is probably due to a winter injury described above. When the bark is gone and wood is revealed, the cambium area has been destroyed. If this type of peeling bark encircles the trunk of the tree, sadly, the tree is doomed.

Last year many homeowners lost willow trees and ornamental pear trees to this type of damage. This year it seems to be crab apples and particularly 'Prairie Fire' crab apples.

What can one do about it? Answer: Nothing — just start over.