
Trees Need Winter Water & Other Care

WINTER WATER

Broadleaf trees do not transpire water through their leaves in winter, as the leaves have dropped. The major use of water for cooling is also unnecessary. So water use is at a minimum, but still happening. Dry winter soils and low root activity due to frozen soil can result in winter drying. Damage occurs most often during warm, dry windy conditions. The side of the tree facing the wind is most susceptible to damage.

Needles on pines, spruce, fir, cedars and junipers live for several years before coming off the tree. This fall we have seen a rather dramatic needle drop of these older needles associated with the very dry early summer and very wet late summer. Evergreens transpire more water in the winter than dormant broadleaf trees, which makes them prone to winter drying.

Trees add sugar to their sap to protect themselves from freezing temperatures. When watering trees in late fall, winter and early spring you want to be careful not to trick the plant into thinking spring is here early. With the warm spells common in Southeast Nebraska during the winter, water, fertilizer and pulling back mulch adds to the fluctuations. When the soil is very dry and snow cover is sparse light to moderate watering is beneficial. It better not to over do the watering. The same is true of the lawn. When water use is only a few hundredth's of an inch a day, it doesn't take a lot of water to meet the needs.

OTHER WINTER CARE

Protecting sensitive plants like tea roses, butterfly bushes, and other less than fully hardy plants is helpful. I was talking to a North Dakota grape grower the other day. He takes the vines down off the trellises and lays them on the frozen ground. They usually get snow cover that stays in his area and he has been able to reduce drying injury quite well with the technique. It does take him two weeks of evenings in the fall and again in the spring to get the job done. You have to like the grapes and the wine to do that.

It is best not to do major trimming to trees in the late fall as it increases the risk of drying injury during the winter. A few small cuts are not much of an issue. In the Nebraska climate it is best to delay fruit tree trimming until March. Even with winter protection, I suggest that tea roses be pruned just enough to fit in the cone with final pruning done after the bush has budded in the spring. This gives added protection in case the winter injury is a bit more severe.

People ask if trees can be moved with a tree spade during the winter. The answer is yes with a few precautions. The wind and temperature should be moderate enough so there is not major drying or freezing of twig tips and roots during the moving process. Once the tree is placed use fine loose soil and water to fill all the gaps around the spade line. This prevents cold from damaging the roots. A good 3 inch mulch of wood chips in addition to the gap filling is a wise move to protect the trees.

Any young trees should also have rabbit and mice protection for eighteen inches to prevent winter feeding. This time of year valuable young pines can benefit from further protection if deer are common in the area, as buck deer can do a good deal of damage while marking territory.

Paul C Hay, Extension Educator

University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension in Gage County • 1115 West Scott Street, Beatrice NE 68310

(402) 223-1384 • FAX: (402) 223-1370 • email: phay1@unl.edu

