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TREE INJURIES REQUIRE CARE

Tree injuries tend to be the rule rather than the exception. All trees receive numerous wounds over their lifetime and homeowners can extend the life of their trees by knowing a few basic principles about care and pruning.

After a tree is wounded, it responds with a series of biological processes which are the basic protection system of all trees. When the outer protective bark of the tree is ruptured, the inner living tissue is exposed and opened up to bacteria and decaying fungi. In response, a tree will undergo changes to form "walls" around the wound, slowing or preventing the spread of disease and decay to the rest of the tree.

The tree uses resins and gums and specialized cells to “wall off” exposed wood tissues. This means decay microorganisms can only invade the part of the tree present before the injury. Callous tissue begins to form and close the wound. Tree wounds never heal, but simply the callous tissue closes over the new wood tissue. The rate the tree closes over the wound depends on the kind of tree, size of the wound and health of the tree.

The following steps can be used to minimize tree injuries and increase the tree’s life in your landscape:

- 1) Prune the tree properly. Don’t leave branch “stubs”. Prune back to a stem branch at least 1/3 the size of the branch you are trimming on. Try to prune branches before they get over 2 inches in diameter.
- 2) Plant trees with proper placement in mind to begin with. Avoid planting too close to a building or sidewalk, street or under utility lines.
- 3) So often people stunt or ruin trees with mower injuries or weed eater injuries. Be careful operating equipment around trees and mulch an area around the base. Mulch helps prevent mechanical injuries.
- 4) Protect young trees from rabbits, mice, deer and other animals that can cause severe damage to trees. Repellents or screen around the trunks may be necessary.
- 5) After a tree is wounded, clean the wound by removing all splintered wood or protruding bark to prevent water from standing in the wound. Do not shape or trace the wound with a chisel or knife. This old treatment is no longer recommended. Keep pruning equipment in good shape and make clean cuts.

Tree wound dressings or tree paints are basically sold as cosmetic items. They do not speed up wound closure or prevent decay. In fact, there is research that shows some of these products can slow down the healing process.



Always prune out dead or dying branches to enhance tree health. This can be done anytime of the year. Vigorous trees withstand injury better and close wounds faster than weak or stressed trees. Deciduous trees can be pruned now in the winter as it is also easier to inspect the branches. Hold off on fruit trees though.

Fruit trees are more susceptible to winter injury and are pruned in late spring before growth begins. Do not prune any fruit tree before January or winter injury can occur. Besides dormant pruning, with fruit trees you may prune at planting; during July and August to restrict growth; to remove water sprouts; and to remove diseased or damaged wood. Once the basic structure of a fruit tree is developed, avoid pruning until fruiting occurs.

For more information, visit the backyard farmer website at: byf.unl.edu.

Randy Pryor, Extension Educator
University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension in Saline County
306 West 3rd Street, Wilber, NE 68465
Phone (402) 821-2151 • Fax (402) 821-3398 • e-mail: randy.pryor@unl.edu