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There's a plant myth that says water should be withheld from plants in fall to induce dormancy and help plants better survive winter. This is a myth and is not true. Withholding water from plants in fall, especially a dry fall following a dry summer like we just experienced, can do more harm than good to plants. If you happen to follow this myth and withheld water last fall; winter watering may be even more important. If we continue to have little precipitation, look into watering evergreens and newly planted trees and shrubs. Not only will plants benefit from the moisture; but moist soils are a better insulation barrier than dry soils. Plant roots are not as cold hardy as above ground parts, and dry soils along with little snow cover can lead to root loss. When possible, lightly water when temperatures are above 40 degrees Fahrenheit and soils are not frozen. The water needs to soak in and not freeze on the surface.

Each winter, Nebraska Extension puts on lawn, tree and garden classes. We won't be holding face to face sessions this year, but we will offer them via zoom; allowing you to watch on your computer from the comfort of your home and still be able to ask your questions. Our landscape and garden classes will be held in the evenings during February and March, starting February 2. Most classes begin at 6:30 PM and end about 8:30. Some of the topics to be covered are Solution Gardening or Plants to Solve Problems, Efficient Turf Watering, Doctoring Your Soil, Growing and Using Herbs, Evergreen Disease and Insect Pests, and a series on Tree Care. If you are interested in learning more about sustainable care of lawns, trees, flowers or vegetables, call me at the Extension office at 563-4901 or e-mail kfeehan2@unl.edu. We will send you the list of lawn and garden classes being offered and registration information.

While it is best to hold off on pruning trees until late winter, now is a good time to remind people not to use tree wound dressings, pruning paint, or any product sold that says it will "promote healing of tree wounds". When a tree branch is pruned, human instinct is to put a band-aid on the wound; but this is one of the worst things we can do. Tree wounds do not ever heal and so no product will promote healing. When a tree is wounded, it sends defense chemicals to the wound to seal it off; then, during the growing season, the tree develops wound wood to close the wound. In place of healing, trees seal wound and this is one reason lumber had darker colored knots. Research shows any type of tree wound dressing interferes with the trees natural sealing process and should not be used. Wound dressings seal in moisture and decay and prevent wound wood from forming. Leave these products on the store shelf and off of your trees.

De-icing agents are sometimes needed for safety but can be harmful to plants. Read and follow label directions when buying and using de-icers. Keep sand, sawdust, or cat litter on hand. These also improve footing on slick surfaces and can be blended with de-icing product to improve traction and reduce the amount of deicer used. A newer organic option are deicers derived from beet juice. They contain only 12% sodium chloride, which is much less than traditional sodium chloride. Beet juice products are fully biodegradable; however some research has shown potential problems with aquatic insects. So ideally these should not be applied where melt runoff will move to aquatic areas. And again, organic or not, always read label directions before use. Beet juice de-icers available to homeowners are Green Gobbler Pet Safe Ice Melt, Snow Joe Beet It Snow & Ice Melter and Organic Melt Premium Granular Ice Melter.

We need tall shade trees to have climate resilient landscapes and communities, not to mention nicer places to live and energy conservation. We also need structurally sound trees to be weather ready. The majority of shade trees are structurally sound; but winter is a great time to assess trees for potential hazards. Branch structure and areas of damage are easier to see when trees are not in leaf. To help homeowners know what to look for in a tree, Nebraska Extension has the free publication "Tree Hazard Awareness". It can be found on our extensionpubs.unl.edu website. Some things of concern to look for in a tree include co-dominant leaders, cracks, decay, fungal conks, girdling roots and trunk lean. The tree hazard awareness publication talks about others and has pictures to help in identifying issues. If a hazard concern is identified in a tree, contact a professional arborist to further evaluate any tree defects.