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21 April 12 PSAs

Questions about spruce trees dying back over winter continue to be asked. In many cases the browning began near the bottom of the tree and then the entire spruce or a good portion of it turned brown. In some cases, signs of a fungal disease can be found on affected spruce trees; however, most foliar diseases will not kill a spruce quickly; or during the winter months. For this reason, it is likely abiotic issues, along with some disease, is responsible for spruce dieback. Abiotic issues include drought stress from last summer, winter burn or desiccation, incorrect planting, using too deep of mulch, leaving burlap on root balls at planting, and more. The combination of stress factors eventually cause the tree, in this case spruce, to dieback. If over 50 percent of a spruce is brown, it is unlikely to recover. If less than 50 percent of a spruce has turned brown, the tree might recover if new growth occurs on branch tips by June.

Composted manure is a source of organic matter to incorporate into gardens to improve soil structure and increase nutrients. Because manure can be a source of harmful pathogens like E.coli, salmonella and parasites like tape worm, it is recommended manures be incorporated into vegetable gardens during fall rather than spring; or, that they are incorporated at least 120 days prior to harvest of vegetables, especially those that contact soil such as lettuce and radish. Other safety tips include NOT ever using pig, dog or cat manure in gardens. Using manure that has been composted rather than using fresh manure. Always washing hands prior to and after working in gardens. And following recommended food safety practices when doing food preparation; including proper hand-washing, washing and peeling vegetables correctly, and not contaminating washed or cooked produce with counters or tools that have not been washed.

It is tree planting time and I can't emphasize enough that planting trees too deep is a common problem causing trees to grow slow, have girdling roots, and be more pest and stress susceptible. If a tree is planted at the same depth it is in its container, and the soil in the planting hole beneath the root ball is loosened, odds are the tree will be planted too deep. Since planting trees at the same depth they are in their containers and loosening soil at the base of planting holes is often done, too deep of planting happens frequently. To plant a tree at the correct depth, wait to dig the planting hole until after the tree's first lateral root at the base of the trunk is located. Only then dig the hole just deep enough so the root ball sits on firm, undisturbed soil and the first root is just below the soil. Dig the hole at least one to two times wider than the root ball's diameter to loosen that soil. Tree roots grow outward and this encourages root growth.

Lawn mowing has begun. If you stick to a once a week mowing schedule, this may not be often enough during rapid spring growth. Healthy turfgrass has an extensive root system. Removing more than one-third of the grass blade while mowing stresses and decreases the root system; setting the lawn up for heat stress and other issues during summer. Mowing may be needed every four or five days during spring. When mowing first begins, set the mower height and then stick with that height through summer and fall. "Set it and forget it" is the best advice for mowing height. A height of 3 to 3.5", and not removing more than one-third of the grass blade during any one mowing, is an important practice for Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue. Frequent mowing and a relative tall height helps turfgrass better tolerate heat and drought stress, compete well with weeds, and be less susceptible to disease and insect issues.

Moles are or will soon be active and their raised tunnels will become noticeable in lawns. A myth associated with moles is the idea that controlling white grubs in lawns will stop moles. This is a myth and killing white grubs will not control moles. Moles mostly eat earthworms and then most other insects they encounter while tunneling. It seems to make sense if insects are controlled, moles will go elsewhere. However, moles are territorial so going elsewhere is not easy for them. Also, trying to control every insect or earthworm in a yard simply will not happen. The number of insects might be reduced, which could in turn increase the amount of tunneling a mole does to find food. If moles are a problem, control them with trapping where feasible or with products containing Talpiron. These are methods proven to work for mole control when used correctly. Trying to kill grubs or other insects with insecticides will not stop moles.

Evergreen Issues and Workshop
By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator
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There have been a number of evergreen issues over the past years and spruce seems to be one of the hardest hit this winter.

To help identify evergreen problems ranging from diseases and insects to abiotic issues, I will be holding a Zoom workshop to cover common issues and how to prevent or control them; and to help answer your questions.

This Zoom will be held April 22 from 7:00 to 8:30 pm. If you would like to participate, please call the Platte County Extension office at 402-563-4901 and provide your email. We will send you the Zoom link and password. There is no cost to participate.

When the needles of an evergreen begin to turn brown and/or drop off, this can be caused by a number of different factors or a combination of them.

It is important to identify the cause so correct measures can be taken at the right time to reduce damage. In some cases, there is nothing that can be done and applying a pesticide is a waste of money and time. In other cases, a care practice like watering or mulching needs to be changed.

There are a number of fungal diseases that infect evergreen needles. Each one causes slightly different symptoms. And while the timing of when fungicides will work is similar between the diseases, different fungicides may be needed for different diseases. Identification is important.

For insects, identification may be even more important. For example, spruce mites feed on trees in spring and fall. This is when control measures need to be taken. However, damage from spruce mites often does not show up until later in the season. If insecticides are applied when the damage becomes noticeable, they will be ineffective.

Another example is bagworms. Mechanical control of removing bagworms by hand needs to be done by mid-May. If an insecticide is used, these need to be applied after eggs hatch. Depending on the type of insecticide, some need to be applied before larvae reach one-half inch in size while others can be applied for larger larvae.

And then there are abiotic issues. These are factors that damage evergreens but are not related to living things like vole damage or a pathogen or an insect.

Abiotic issues range from environmental to human caused. They include drought stress, soil compaction, winter burn or dessication, incorrect planting, using too deep of mulch, leaving burlap on root balls at planting, and much more.

The goal of the Zoom workshop will be to help with identification of common evergreen problems and to cover recommendations for managing or preventing issues. Identification and timing of correct control measures will be the focus.

Resources from Nebraska Extension and the Nebraska Forest Service will also be shared to further help participants identify and manage evergreen problems.

With so many issues, replacing evergreens with a variety of different evergreen trees is important. Evergreens to plant in Nebraska will briefly be covered during the zoom workshop.

Again, to participate, call the Platte County Extension office at 402-563-4901 to sign up and receive the zoom link information.