



Kelly Feehan

Extension Educator – Community Environment

2715 13th Street, Columbus, NE 68601

[402-563-4901](tel:402-563-4901)

environment.unl.edu

water.unl.edu/stormwater

platte.unl.edu

Twitter: @KellyFeehan2

Shrub and Boxwood Dieback

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator (kfeehan2@unl.edu, 402-563-4901)

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Shrubshrubs are plants whose stems are not as hardy as their roots and they may die back to near the ground over winter. Don't be in a hurry to remove such shrubs. Give them a chance to start new growth.

These shrubs are known as suffrutescent as opposed to woody or herbaceous. They retain a woody base but have semi-woody stems.

Examples include butterfly bush or Buddleia, blue mist Spirea, beautyberry, Russian sage and perennial hibiscus.

Each spring, the dead wood needs to be removed. After a mild winter, the amount of pruning needed may be minimal.

After a cold winter, such as we just experienced, shrubs can die back to the ground.

When this occurs, plants are slower to begin new growth in spring. It might be assumed the plant is dead and it is removed too soon.

As a rule, give shrubs like butterfly bush, blue mist Spirea and beautyberry until about June before giving up on them and replacing them.

Dying back to near the ground does not affect blooming as most of these plants only bloom on current year's wood. This characteristic actually helps increase blooming as all of the wood is current.

Another shrub that often appears dead in spring is boxwood. A larger than normal percentage have turned brown this winter.

The browning is caused by winter desiccation. The problem is selecting and planting the wrong plant in the location. Boxwood needs to be planted in a fairly shady site protected from wind, and receive adequate water all season.

Boxwoods are evergreen. When plants remain green all year, the leaves continue to lose water during winter. In cold or dry soils, the lost water cannot be replaced and leaf and stem tissue dries out with leaves turning brown from late winter into spring.

As with shrubs, wait until June. If boxwood sends out new growth, it might slowly recover. However, it is likely to continue to have the same issue each year. If a plant is completely brown with no new growth by late May, it will need to be removed.

The best way to reduce winter desiccation in boxwood is to only plant them in protected locations and provide adequate water throughout summer and fall. Avoid overwatering; and any pruning or fertilization after mid-July.

During winter, when air temperatures are above 40 F degrees, lightly water the soil around boxwoods. Know that winter watering is not nearly as beneficial as summer and fall watering.

Another option is to screen the shrubs with burlap or snow fencing to protect them from prevailing winds or apply an antidessicant, such as Wilt-Pruf, two to three times during winter.

A great option is also to select a different shrub that is better adapted to the location and to Nebraska's winter climate.

May 17, 2021 - PSAs (kfeehan2@unl.edu) (402-563-4901)

Striped or spotted cucumber beetles may soon be snacking on cucumber plants as they grow. The feeding beetles do not do as much harm as a bacteria they may transmit to plants. Bacterial wilt is a cucumber disease that causes vines to suddenly wilt and die during summer. This bacteria overwinters in cucumber beetles and is transmitted to plants during feeding, mostly in spring. Once a plant is infected, there is no cure but to promptly remove plants. To manage bacterial wilt, select resistant varieties of cucumber and prevent beetles feeding on plants during spring. This can be done by covering plants with a floating row cover until they bloom. If you choose to use insecticide, monitor for beetles with yellow sticky traps

placed among cucumber plants. Once beetles begin to be trapped, insecticides registered for vegetables can be applied until plants begin to bloom as cucumbers rely on bees and other insects for pollination.

Shady areas where turfgrass struggles to grow are common in landscapes. Often, homeowners purchase a grass seed mixture labeled for shady areas. These mixes usually contain some type of fine-leaved fescue such as chewings, red or sheeps fescue. And usually these mixes fail as well. While they are shade tolerant, these types of fine-leaved fescues do not handle heat or traffic well and are easily overwatered by lawn irrigation systems that water shady areas the same as sunny areas. The best grass to grow in shady areas is one of the turf-type tall fescues. When establishing tall fescue in a shady area where other grass struggles to grow, begin with sod, rather than direct seeding. Use lower rates of fertilizer and avoid overwatering in shady areas. If tall fescue will not grow in an area, stop trying to grow turfgrass in the area and use shade loving perennials or organic mulch in place of turfgrass.

In windy Nebraska, newly planted trees often need staking the first year after planting. I've often noticed young trees staked incorrectly, which could lead a tree having a weaker structure with increased susceptibility to wind and ice damage; along with slower root development. It is important to keep in mind the goal of staking young trees is NOT to prevent the top half of the tree swaying with the wind; but to prevent the root ball from shifting in the soil and tearing young roots. Trees need to be staked as low as possible on the trunk with a sturdy stake. The preferred method today is one stake inserted firmly into the soil sideways about two feet above the ground, then attached to the tree with a wide band that will not damage the trunk. Do not tie a tall stake to a trees trunk to keep it rigid and prevent it swaying in the wind. Wind sway is what strengthens a trunk, along with promoting root and trunk growth.

Grassy weeds in flower beds can quickly become a problem if hand weeding and correct mulching is not tended to. As with all weeds, there are four control methods, and using a combination works best. Planting flowers densely enough to help shade out weeds is one method. Using organic mulch correctly will help prevent weed seed germination and smother tiny seedlings. Mulch, like wood chips, is used correctly if placed on moist soil, kept to a depth of about three inches, and not piled against flower stems. For weed control, not much beats regular hand-weeding. Young grassy weeds are easy to pull when young, and if you do not have a weed mat beneath the mulch for the roots to become entwined. If grassy weeds get ahead of you, the herbicides Grass-Be-Gone or Over the Top can be applied to grassy weeds without killing ornamental flowers. Be sure to read and follow all label directions carefully.

Subshrubs are shrubs whose above ground stems are not as hardy as the roots. These shrubs act more like herbaceous perennials and portions of the stems die back each winter. Such shrubs include butterfly bush or Buddleia, blue mist Spirea, beautyberry and perennial hibiscus. Each spring, the dead wood of subshrubs needs to be removed. After a mild winter, the amount of pruning needed to remove dead wood may be minimal. After a cold winter, such as we just experienced, subshrubs can die all the way back to near the ground. When subshrubs do this, they are often slower to begin new growth in spring. Homeowners may assume the plant was winter killed and remove it. However, it could still be alive. Give subshrubs, like butterfly bush, blue mist Spirea and beautyberry, until at least June 1st before giving up on them and replacing them. If no new growth is seen by the first week of June, go ahead and remove them.