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Tree Wounds

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When a tree has an open wound or is pruned, I'm asked what needs to be done to the wound or cavity and the answer is usually nothing. This is true even if the wood within the wound is moist, dark and soft.

While we may treat our scrapes and scratches with antibiotics and cover them with bandages, similar treatment for tree wounds can do more harm than good.

Also, filling the cavity of larger wounds with something like cement will not stop decay from spreading. It could increase the risk of decay. And there is little data supporting that filled cavities give trees more stability.

Like all living organisms, trees have natural mechanisms for responding to wounds or fighting off attack by insects and diseases. Research has shown treating wounds with dressings and paints or covering them interferes with this response.

When a tree is wounded, it responds by sealing the wound with physical compartmentalization and chemical barrier zones. The wound never heals. Knots in lumber are wounds that were compartmentalized and the barrier zones worked.

Wounds expose the inside of a tree to organisms, primarily bacteria and fungi that may cause wood to discolor and decay. Callus tissue develops to close off the wound from the outside. Barrier zones develop internally to stop or limit the progress of decay within a tree.

If a tree is fast and effective with natural wound response, the infection remains localized and does not spread. If not effective, the infection will spread. Most vigorous or actively growing trees are fairly successful in wound response.

Younger trees and healthy, unstressed trees respond faster than older or stressed trees. The best way to prevent infection or decay in trees is to use practices that promote healthy growth, make proper pruning cuts and avoid mechanical wounds such as from mowers or weed trimmers.

If a tree is wounded and the bark or wood appears jagged, loose bark and ragged edges should be removed with a sharp knife. When doing this, do not remove any healthy bark so more live tissue is exposed. Otherwise, let the tree deal with the wound.

The reasons wound dressings are not recommended is they prevent drying and encourage fungal growth; interfere with wound wood formation; inhibit compartmentalization and may serve as food source for pathogens.

While pruning causes a wound, it is important to prune trees to prevent weak branch development and to remove dead or damaged wood. Learn how to make correct pruning cuts or hire a professional arborist to prune trees.

To reduce stress and promote growth, provide a deep watering of 8 to 12 inches during dry periods and use a six foot diameter ring of mulch, 3 to 4 inches deep, around the tree.

When planting, avoid planting too deep and avoid girdling roots by selecting smaller trees to begin with, trees grown in containers like root bags that reduce circling roots, or cut encircling roots before planting.

If a tree has a wound or cavity that is not closing, monitor the tree for signs of decline such as off-color leaves or dead twigs and branches. This could be a sign decay is spreading within the tree and an arborist needs to inspect the tree to determine if removal is needed.

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The news about fall armyworm damaging lawns in Lincoln has homeowners concerned, and some attempting control too soon. While we need to be watchful and monitor for this insect, no insecticides should be applied to lawns unless fall armyworm is positively identified as being present. The questions I've had center around seeing moths in lawns. There are numerous types of moths out and about this time of year; and the majority are not lawn pests. And moths, even the adults of fall armyworms, do absolutely no damage to lawns. If the moths you're seeing are fall armyworm, these are adults mating and laying eggs in tan fluffy masses on fence posts and other areas. The presence of moths is not the time to spray. First, identify what type of moth it is. If it is fall armyworm, begin monitoring the lawn for the presence of striped caterpillars. Until eggs hatch, there is nothing to kill with insecticides.

If houseplants were summered outdoors, now is the time to begin washing them off with strong streams of water to reduce hitchhikers, like insects, moving indoors with the plants. It's time to reverse the hardening-off process by moving houseplants into shade to acclimate them to lower light conditions found indoors. This can help reduce leaf yellowing and drop that often occurs once they are back indoors. And it's time to keep a close watch on overnight temperatures. The type of houseplant determines when it should be moved indoors. Most houseplants need nighttime temperatures above 50 degrees Fahrenheit and are best brought in whenever temperatures will be lower. They can be put outdoors during the day if needed. Some houseplants, like spider plants, tolerate temperatures as low as 35 degrees, but not many. It is important not wait for the first frost advisory to bring houseplants indoors for winter.

Fall may be for planting but we are past the time for seeding lawns. The ideal window for seeding tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass is August 15 to September 15. This is based on growing degree days which are a measure of heat units used to predict pest and plant growth. Putting growing degree days in practical terms, on average, turf seeded August 15 could be three and a half times more mature by winter than an identical stand seeded Sep 12; and 20 times more mature than a stand seeded on October 1. This is why it is recommended to seed as early in the August 15 to September 15 window as possible. While seeding might be successful yet this fall, poor establishment and/or winterkill could be expected if seeding is attempted. Know that ALL cool-season turfgrasses are best seeded by September 15, and preferably earlier, for optimum establishment by winter and greater success at lawn establishment.

When a tree trunk has an open hole and the wood inside is moist and mushy, I'm asked what needs to be done; and the answer is nothing. When healthy, unstressed trees are wounded, they seal off wounds so decay does not spread within the tree. If a tree is unhealthy or stressed, it may not do this and decay can spread. Unfortunately, there is nothing to be done but hope the tree has or eventually will seal off the wound. Practices such as scraping out rotted wood, treating wounds with wound dressing, or filling the hole with something, like cement, will only interfere with the trees natural response and reduce the chance of sealing. It is best to water correctly and use a six foot diameter ring of mulch, 3 to 4 inches deep, around the tree to promote healthy growth. Then monitor the tree for signs of decline like off-color leaves or dead branches. This could be a sign decay is spreading within the tree and removal is needed.

To cut back or not to cut back. That is the question with perennials at this time of year. Herbaceous perennials like peony, black-eyed Susan and coneflower die to the ground after a freeze. Their roots survive winter but the dead stems and leaves need to be removed before new growth begins next spring. It's best to wait until after a hard freeze to cut back perennials back so the plant can store carbohydrates from the leaves in the roots. After tops are killed, the advantage to leaving them is winter interest, nesting for pollinators, seeds for overwintering birds, and to catch snow for increased soil moisture. The disadvantage to leaving them is some are ugly; and carryover of diseases or insect pests overwinter. Most gardeners do both. If a plant has winter interest and did not have a pest problem, it's left until next spring while others are cut back at least part way to tidy the garden and reduce overwintering pests.