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Plastic or paper tree wraps are often recommended for the trunk of young, thinned bark trees to prevent winter sunscald injury. If used incorrectly, tree wraps may cause more harm than good. When used, flexible, light-colored, plastic wraps appear to be the safest for providing trunk protection. These loose-fitting wraps allow air circulation to buffer temperature extremes, and prevent excess moisture from accumulating between the wrap and the trunk. Light colored corrugated wraps may also be better than simple paper wraps. Tree wraps are best used only on young, smooth barked trees and only during winter. In late fall, apply a light-colored plastic tree wrap or corrugated wrap from the ground up to the lowest branches, being sure to overlap the wrap when possible. Remove tree wrap in spring. Protecting tree trunks the year of planting is usually sufficient, but some trees may need to be wrapped a second year.

Voles, which are small mouse-like rodents, do not hibernate. All winter, they feed on plant seeds as well as leaves and stems of grasses, and occasionally roots and bulbs. They will actively feed on turfgrass beneath snow cover. The most economic damage voles can do is feeding on and girdling young trees. Vole tunneling may undermine retaining walls, causing them to collapse. Voles are often attracted to spilled bird seed since grains are a favorite food. Removing or limiting this food source can help reduce vole populations. Clean up spilled bird seed on a regular basis, or move bird feeders to areas less susceptible to vole damage or areas easier to clean up, such as over pavement. Keep weedy areas mowed and avoid deep mulch layers near trees and shrubs as these harbor voles. If vole population control is needed, trapping that uses peanut butter and some bird seed as bait is a good choice.

Some evergreen trees and shrubs naturally develop winter color. Because we are seeing an increase in evergreen diseases, seeing a change in color on an evergreen during winter may concern tree owners. This can prompt questions about winter color and concern that the tree is diseased. Winter color is natural and not harmful. It develops in late fall and early winter and ranges from darker green to purplish-brown or bronze. In contrast, an evergreen like Scotch pine that might be infected with pine wilt disease, tends to turn a dull green or grayish green first, and then rapidly turns completely brown. With winter desiccation, browning typically shows up in late winter or spring and not during early winter. It is always important to positively identify the cause of plant concerns. It may be something natural and not an issue at all. For evergreens right now, it remains important to keep their soil moist prior to the soil freezing.

Tiny gnats flying around houseplants, our faces, or windows during winter are most likely fungus gnats. Adults lay 100 to 150 eggs on the soil of houseplants and the larvae feed on fungus and organic matter in potting mixes. Fungus gnats are most often associated with overwatered or poorly drained container soil; especially during winter when plants continue to receive the same amount of water as during summer, but are not using as much water. Fungus gnats do not bite or harm anything in the home. To eliminate a fungus gnat infestation, water less frequently. A plant may need repotting into a container with drainage holes and a potting mix that provides better drainage. Yellow sticky cards can be purchased at garden stores to catch flying gnats. In addition, there are biological control products such as *Bacillus thuringiensis* that can be applied to the soil to help control the larvae.

When fresh-cut Christmas trees are brought into warm homes, insects and spiders overwintering on them can become active. The most common reported are aphids and spiders. Those that do become active indoors are considered accidental or nuisance invaders. They will not harm people, pets or anything in the home. Aphids might lead to a few sticky presents and spiders may cause frightful screams, but otherwise no harm is done. Most insects overwinter in the egg stage. If they hatch due to artificial warming, they usually do so in small enough numbers that they go unnoticed. Many young insects will desiccate and die from dry indoor air and do not breed and multiply in the home. Christmas trees should NOT be

sprayed with insecticides if insects are noticed. While, labeled household insecticides are not a serious health risk, there is no benefit to exposing people or pets to pesticides that are not needed.

Protecting Trees from Winter Voles Feeding

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

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It is time to protect young trees from vole damage. When green foliage is no longer present, voles turn to other plant parts such as tree bark and inner wood of young trees.

Voles are small, mouse-like rodents found throughout Nebraska. Though commonly called meadow or field mice, their one inch long tails, stocky build, and small eyes distinguish them from true mice.

While they may cause some landscape damage, keep in mind voles are an important food source for many predators like snakes, hawks, owls, foxes, coyotes, and mink. Mortality rates for voles are very high. Life expectancy in the wild often does not exceed two months, with few living longer than 16 months.

Voles do not hibernate. All winter, they feed on plant seeds as well as leaves and stems of grasses, and occasionally roots and bulbs. They can actively feed on turfgrass beneath snow cover, although turf recovers fairly quickly once spring growth begins.

The most economic damage voles do is feeding on and girdling young trees which can kill them. High populations and vole tunneling may undermine retaining walls, causing them to collapse.

Voles usually damage woody plants from late fall through early spring. They tunnel through snow, and may gnaw on trees and shrubs up to the height snow accumulates. Individual tooth marks, about one-sixteenth inch wide and three-eighths inch long, may be visible on the wood after winter.

The gnawing marks left by voles will be irregular in appearance and at various angles. In contrast, rabbits leave tooth marks that are about one-eighth inch wide and very regular.

The best way to protect young trees is exclusion. Use one-fourth inch hardware cloth or plastic cylinders to protect individual trees.

The cylinders should be tight to the ground or buried two to three inches deep and extend higher than the expected snow depth in winter. If rabbits are a concern, cylinders should extend about 18 inches above the expected snow depth.

When making the cylinder, overlap the edges at least one inch and fasten securely so gaps do not form where voles can squeeze through. Cover the tops of the tubes to prevent trapping birds.

If plastic wraps are used, remove these during spring and replace them the following November. Cylinders of galvanized hardware cloth should last about five years. Make them large enough in diameter to accommodate expected trunk growth if they are to be left in place during the growing season.

To help reduce vole populations, make the habitat less suitable to them. High populations cannot become established without food and protection from predators.

Keep weedy areas mowed and avoid deep mulch layers near trees and shrubs as these harbor voles. Know that voles often thrive under weed barriers laid on the ground to control weeds around shrub and tree plantings.

Voles are often attracted to spilled bird seed since grains are a favorite food. Find ways to reduce spillage from bird feeders and clean up spilled seed on a regular basis. If possible, move bird feeders to areas less susceptible to vole damage or easier to clean up.