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Tree Bark Splitting, Peeling or Oozing

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Once leaves drop from trees, splitting, peeling, bleached or oozing bark may become more noticeable. The cause can range from normal bark development to environmental causes or disease.

If tree bark is peeling, this could be normal. The bark of many young trees is smooth and thin. As a tree grows, the bark thickens with outer tissues dying. Continued growth pushes bark outward, causing outer layers to crack.

On some trees, the dead layers peel and drop off. Shedding bark is characteristic of sycamore, redbud, silver maple, shagbark hickory, and birch. On these trees, peeling will be fairly uniform on the trunk and larger branches.

If cracking and bark peeling is only on the south or southwest sides of young fruit trees, red maples, and lindens, this indicates sunscald and can lead to problems for the tree.

Sunscald occurs when warm, sunny winter days heats the bark, causing bark cells to become active. The cells are then damaged by cold temperatures at night. Damaged tissue becomes sunken, discolored and eventually cracks and sloughs off.

There is not much that can be done for trees once the bark is damaged. Wound dressings or tree paints are of no benefit and may lead to additional problems. Other than avoiding water stress, allow a tree take care of itself through its natural wound response.

Tree wraps may be recommended for the trunk of young, thinned bark trees to prevent sunscald injury. However, there are few studies that show they help and some that show they may cause more harm.

According to Purdue University, studies of common tree wraps have shown they do not prevent extreme fluctuations in bark temperature. In some cases, temperature extremes are worse. And tree wraps can attract insects or kill a tree if left on so long they girdle the tree.

If used, flexible, light-colored, plastic wraps appear to be safest. These looser fitting wraps allow air circulation to buffer temperature extremes and prevent excess moisture accumulating between the wrap and trunk. Light colored corrugated wraps may also be better than flat paper wraps.

If used, place tree wraps on young, smooth barked trees during winter only. In November, apply a light-colored plastic wrap or corrugated wrap from the ground up to the lowest branches. Remove tree wrap in spring. Protecting a tree, the winter after planting is usually sufficient.

If slime is noticed oozing out of a tree, or the bark appears bleached, this is likely a bacterial disease known as wet wood. It is most common on elms, cottonwood and willow. The flow of slime flux is what bleaches the bark a lighter color.

Although the strength of wood may be affected, it is minor since this disease also inhibits wood-rotting organisms. Bacteria that causes Westwood is common in soil and water and likely enter the tree through wounds in roots.

Wet wood cannot be cured. Since this disease rarely affects the overall health of a tree, no treatment is needed other than preventing stress through timely watering. Drain tubes were once recommended to help relieve pressure, but no longer as they create a wound that can make the disease worse.

Sources: Iowa State University and Kansas State University

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If you have a compost pile, be sure to turn it about once a month or more; even during the winter months. Because the decomposition process produces heat, compost piles can remain active during our colder months, if turned fairly often and kept moist. Turning a compost pile means moving undecomposed material from the outsides and top of the pile to the center. This is where microorganisms are doing the job of decomposition and breaking down plant material into compost. Turning also introduces oxygen microorganisms need for decomposition. When turning, check the material for moisture by squeezing a fistful in your hand. It should feel moist with no excess water squeezed out. If needed, lightly sprinkle the material to just moisten it. Compost piles should not be too light and fluffy as they can dry out too quickly. They should also not be packed too tightly as oxygen is needed.

Arborvitae and boxwood are two evergreens we commonly see winter drying or desiccation injury that causes the plants to turn brown and die. When planted in the wrong location, it's not unusual to see browning during summer or fall as well. These two evergreens are classic examples for the saying "Right Plant, Right Place"; meaning it is important to select a plant well adapted to the growing conditions of the planting site. Arborvitae and boxwood are often planted in the wrong location and desiccation injury is common. To help reduce the risk of browning from desiccation, both plants need to be planted in a location protected from strong winds. Boxwood performs best in shade. Arborvitae prefers sun, but should not be planted in a south facing location near a light colored building or close to a sidewalk or street. Both plants need well drained soil, but one that remains moist from spring until late fall.

Tree owners may be concerned if they notice bark peeling off a tree. For some trees, this is normal. The bark of young trees is smooth and thin. As a tree grows, the bark layer thickens with the outer tissue dying. Continued growth pushes bark outward, causing outer layers to crack. On some trees, these dead layers peel and drop off. Shedding bark is characteristic of sycamore, redbud, silver maple, shagbark hickory, and birch. Sycamore tends to peel in blotches revealing a cream or green inner bark. On redbuds, outer bark may fall off exposing an orangish inner bark. Silver maple tends to peel long, thin bark strips. Peeling is of no concern on these trees. However, cracking and bark peeling only on the south sides of fruit trees, red maples, and lindens indicates sunscald and can lead to issues. Unfortunately, not much can be done for trees with damaged bark. Wound dressings or tree paints are of no benefit. (Source: Iowa State University)

When buying bulk birdseed, inspect it closely before buying or you might bring home more than birdseed. One of our common stored food pests is Indian meal moth; and it can enter our garages and homes from birdseed. Indian meal moths are tiny, about one-half inch long, and reddish brown with tan-colored bands. Larvae are small and cream colored with a reddish head. Signs of Indian meal moth include the presence of moths or larvae, but also webbing or frass found inside bird seed or other grain-based products, like cereal. When storing birdseed, place it in containers with a sealed lid to prevent pests emerging and invading our own food pantries. Check stored food areas often for signs of Indian meal moth or grain beetles. If found, dispose of infested foods, clean the area thoroughly; and store grain-based food items in air tight containers. Insecticides should not be used as a control method for pantry pests.

If a smelly slime is noticed oozing out of a tree, or bark that appears bleached, this is likely a bacterial disease known as wet wood or slime flux. It is most common on elms, cottonwood and willow. The flow of ooze is what bleaches the bark a lighter color. This ooze is toxic to the cambium layer of the tree and can retard the formation of callus tissue that covers pruning wounds. Though the strength of wood may be affected, the effect is minor as this disease also inhibits wood-rotting organisms. The bacteria that causes Westwood are common in soil and water and likely enter the tree through wounds in roots. Wet wood cannot be cured. Since this disease rarely affects the overall health of a tree, no treatment is needed other than preventing stress through timely watering. Drain tubes were once recommended to help relieve pressure, but they no longer are as they create an additional wound that can make the disease worse. (Source: Kansas State University)