



Snow is more than just white fluffy stuff. It gives great exercise to those who scoop it, acts as a buffer between the frigid temperatures and plant material, and it can also show how windbreaks work and tests their effectiveness. Who would have known that snow was so useful?

Windbreaks are a way to slow wind and the snow it carries. They can reduce the effort spent on snow management, which means the possibility of less work for you. Most windbreaks are designed with one of two main objectives in mind: to spread the snow across a large area or to dump it in a relatively small area. The objective of the windbreak determines its design. Those that distribute the snow over a large area, like field windbreaks, are tall and are relatively porous. This allows the snow to be spread out over the field and allow for a more even distribution of moisture. Windbreaks that have multiple rows and are planted close together are designed to slow the wind and dump the snow in a designated area.

If you want to control blowing winds and to confine snow, consider a living snow fence. These types of “snow fences” you only have to install once, compared to every year with the traditional slat style or plastic snow fences. The benefits of living snow fences include a greater snow capacity, less maintenance once they are established, a longer life span, a wide range of benefits like wildlife habitat, and not to mention the aesthetic value. In major storms, the vertical slat snow fences can reach their snow storing capacity quickly. According to the Nebraska Forest Service, a three-row mature living snow fence with a height of 20 feet will store over 16 times more snow than a single-row slat-fence with a height of 3-4 feet.

There are a few rules to follow when thinking of installing a planting to control snow and wind. The living snow fence is most effective when it is placed perpendicular to the prevailing winter winds. These usually come from the northwest in Nebraska. There should be plenty of room on the leeward side, back side, of the windbreak for drifts. Location of corners and roads also plays a role in the location of the windbreak. Trees should be planted no closer than 200 feet from corners or intersections to allow for traffic visibility and sight lines for vehicles.

The plant material that you use is also important in windbreak design. The species will vary depending on the climate, soil type, windbreak objectives, and most importantly the space that is available for the mature plant.

When choosing plant material, remember the growing conditions and available space. Species diversity is key with windbreak design. Windbreaks that are made up of one or two species are more susceptible to being wiped out by insects or diseases if an infestation occurs. Diverse windbreaks are still functional if an infestation occurs within one or two species.

Windbreaks, like most things, also have a useful lifespan. If your windbreak is mature, between 30-50 years old, it might be time to rejuvenate. Your local Natural Resource District, NRD, might be the place to turn. They offer low-cost seedling trees for planting farm or livestock windbreaks, wildlife habitat, living snow fences, or other plantings. For more information about the NRD Conservation Tree Program contact your local NRD office.

It may be time to rethink your feelings about snow. Instead of thinking of it as a burden, try to think of it as a blessing, especially when it melts.

Elizabeth Exstrom is the Horticulture Extension Educator with Nebraska Extension in Hall County. For more information contact Elizabeth at elizabeth.exstrom@unl.edu, her blog at <http://huskerhort.com/>, or HuskerHort on Facebook and Twitter.