

WARM WINTER WEATHER WOES FOR TREES AND SHRUBS

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Winter weather, especially extremes in weather, can be hard on trees and shrubs. And while Nebraska is known for its often changing weather, broader extremes are becoming the norm leading to plant injury and stress.

Plants prefer an average and steady temperature; and one that is colder than we've been experiencing. Warm, sunny winter days increase the risk of winter drying and sunscald injury. A lack of soil moisture and snow cover greatly increases the risk of winter desiccation.

With an increase in environmental stress, we also see more disease and insect problems in some of our trees and shrubs. Stressed plants are more prone to attack or infection.

Winter watering is becoming increasingly important to help reduce winter drying. While adequate summer and fall watering is most beneficial, winter watering would be wise this year.

Winter desiccation results in evergreens turning brown during spring. Just because an evergreen looks fine now does not mean it is not stressed. It can take an evergreen months to turn brown after a fatal injury. Just think of Christmas trees. They remain green a long time after being cut down.

Evergreens most at risk are newly planted evergreens but even established Arborvitae, Japanese Yew and some Junipers are quite susceptible. Evergreens planted in the last year or two and those planted near south facing walls of light colored homes or pavement are even more at risk.

While we may not see a lot of desiccation on established spruce and pines, this does not mean they are not stressed. Especially with spruce, we continue to see an increase in diseases that are tied to moisture stress.

Winter watering needs to be done when temperatures are above 45 degrees Fahrenheit and early in the day for water to soak into the soil before nightfall. Water should not pool against a tree trunk and plant stems to freeze over night as this can cause damage.

When soils are dry and not frozen, apply water slowly with a slow running hose or by punching holes near the bottom of a five gallon bucket. Place the bucket over tree roots and fill it with water, allowing the water to slowly trickle out of the small holes.

About once a month, if needed, moisten the soil to about an eight inch depth from the trunk to just beyond branch tips.

Placing a four inch layer of wood chip mulch over the roots of evergreens will help conserve soil moisture during the growing season and throughout winter. Mulch layers should not be too deep or piled against tree trunks.

If deeper than three inches after the mulch settles, tree roots can grow up into the mulch and be killed by cold temperatures. Voles may also use mulch for protection and gnaw on tree trunks.

And if you have a real Christmas tree, consider cutting off the branches and using them to protect tender perennials and young shrubs. By placing the branches over the tops of perennial plants or inserting them into young shrubs, the branches will act like a winter mulch, protecting plants from drying winds, bright sun and temperature extremes.