

Tree Bark Splitting, Peeling or Oozing

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator (kfeehan2@unl.edu)

Release: Week of December 6, 2021

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 wetwood. 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 wetwood is common in soil and water and likely enter the tree through wounds in roots.

Wetwood 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