

Winter Injury May Still Show Up  
By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator  
For Release: April 11, 2022

We all know winter was dry and windy with above average temperatures. This is stressful for evergreen plants because green foliage loses moisture all winter, especially under such conditions.

Many evergreens look fine now but they are not out of the woods yet. Conditions remain dry and windy; and only time will tell how much winter injury occurred. If it does appear, do not be in a hurry to prune out damaged tissue.

Most winter injury will show up over the next two months. This is because trees have a delayed response to damage. Think about a real Christmas tree. It has a fatal wound when cut for sale; but remains green for at least a few months or longer.

While most winter injury has already occurred, even if there are no symptoms yet; watering when soils are dry remains important. As soil warms, roots become active and actively take up water.

Winter watering is recommended to prevent soil cracks which allow colder temperatures to reach roots; and to have soil moisture available for when roots become active. Correct watering during the growing season and well into fall is most important.

Over the next months, water evergreens and young plants when soils are dry. Do not fertilize stressed plants. In general, very few trees need fertilizer in addition to what they receive from lawn fertilization. And no plant should be fertilized when it is stressed by environmental conditions or pest issues.

The correct use of mulch is beneficial in maintaining a cooler, moist soil. Add a two to four inch layer of mulch in a six foot diameter ring around the base of trees. Be sure to keep mulch away from tree trunks and plant stems.

If evergreen needles begin to turn a dull green, tan or brown, wait to prune out damaged plant tissue until about June 1. Waiting allows new growth to occur to aid recovery.

While evergreen needles or leaves may turn brown, twigs and leaf buds could still be viable. However, the new growth on evergreens may not begin until May. Waiting to prune allows us to see if there will be any new growth.

If no new growth occurs on discolored evergreen branches by June 1, and the damage is severe enough that many branches need to be pruned back beyond where there is green foliage; it would be best to replace such plants.

Evergreens will not generate new growth from a point on a branch where there is no green foliage. This is why we don't prune evergreens too far back on a branch. Japanese Yew are about the only evergreen that might generate some new growth but it takes a long time before they would do so.

Which evergreens are we most likely to see damage on? Given the conditions this year, almost any evergreen could show some damage. Those that frequently suffer winter desiccation include young or recently planted evergreens, Arborvitae, white pine and broadleaf evergreens like boxwood.

Arborvitae and white pine are cold hardy and do best in sunny areas. They are best planted in locations protected from high winds and where soil can be kept fairly moist, but not wet.

Boxwood needs to be planted out of full sun. Shaded locations are best and their soil must be uniformly moist throughout summer and well into fall, but not wet. It's best not to plant them in landscapes where rock is used as a mulch.