

WINTER WATERING

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A common question this winter has been about watering. With our very dry summer and fall followed by little precipitation this winter, the risk of plant injury is high.

Evergreens and any tree or shrub planted in the last five years are most susceptible to drying injury, but lawns and perennials can also be affected.

Watering should be done if the soil is not frozen and it is dry. Check the soil with a screw driver or trowel first. If needed, use a garden hose to water and do not turn on automatic sprinkler systems yet.

Only water when air temperatures are above 40 to 45 degrees Fahrenheit. Water early enough in the day for water to soak into soil before nightfall and to allow some plant drying to occur. This helps to avoid plant injury from crown hydration. Avoid excess watering so it does not pool around plant stems.

For example, on lawns and herbaceous perennials plant crowns can absorb moisture and rehydrate. If a rapid drop to freezing temperatures occurs soon after, water taken up by the plant crown freezes. Ice crystals then form that can rupture and kill plant cells.

This is known as crown hydration injury. It sometimes occurs naturally when snow is melting or if early spring rains are followed quickly by freezing temperatures.

While winter watering can provide some benefit, especially this year, adequate summer and fall watering are far more important in reducing winter injury from drying. During the growing season and well into fall, plant soils are best kept moist, but not saturated.

Plants that are under or overwatered during the growing season are at higher risk of winter injury. Overwatering leads to weakened root systems that do not effectively take up moisture. The plant suffers desiccation injury even though the cause is overwatering.

If conditions make winter watering feasible, evergreens and young trees and shrubs are the first priority. Evergreens are most susceptible to winter drying because they lose moisture from green needles all winter particularly on warm winter days. Trees are also more costly to replace than a lawn area or perennial.

While too late this winter, for valuable evergreens growing in exposed location, a physical barrier made of burlap, weed barrier fabric, or snow fencing can be put into place to provide wind protection. This helps reduce transpirational water loss from foliage.

And here's a note about fire hazards and ornamental grasses. Given how dry it is this year, be aware that ornamental grasses whose tops have been left over winter are a high fire hazard. Dry grass tops are flammable and if ignited, flames on these tall grass can reach as high as 20 feet.

The risk of fire should be taken into consideration most everywhere this winter. And if you have a tall ornamental grass near your home or other building, it might be wise to cut it back sooner rather than later this year to reduce the fire risk. Or at least hose it down to help reduce risk.