

Tree Related Inquiries

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Release: Week of December 11, 2023

As part of my job, I answer landscape related questions for area stakeholders who call, email or stop by the Extension office for science-based information. While the number of questions decrease at this time of year, here are a few timely tree questions others might be interested in knowing the answer.

I was recently asked about tree wrap. In this case, a tree had peeling bark this summer and someone recommended to the homeowners to cover the area with tree wrap. The question I was asked is if the wrap should be replaced now because it was falling off.

When a tree has any kind of wound, the area should never be covered during summer with anything; not wound dressing, pruning paint or tree wrap. While we may feel compelled to do this because we put band-aids on our own wounds, covering tree wounds causes more harm than good. It creates a moist environment conducive to decay organisms and tree wrap can be a hiding place for insects.

Maintaining tree health by not planting too deep, by watering and mulching correctly, and by not overfertilizing is the best way to help trees seal and eventually close wounds and fight decay. Trees respond to wounds with defense chemicals. Studies show stressed trees have less effective wound response.

Tree wrap is only recommended on young or thin barked trees during winter. If used, it is put in place in November or December and removed each spring. The purpose of winter tree wrap is to reduce sunscald injury on the south and southwest sides of young trunks during winter, especially if the trunk has been wounded such as by a lawn mower or weed trimmer.

Another question was related to an insect. While pruning evergreen branches for holiday decorating, a homeowner noticed white specks on spruce and asked if these were harmful. If spruce or pine have white waxy spots on their needles that can be flicked off with a thumbnail, this is the insect pine needle scale.

There would need to be a fairly high population of active scales to damage an evergreen. While trees should be watched for growing infestations or damage such as discolored needles where a lot of scales are found, control is usually not needed.

Scales are sap-sucking insects that feed during summer from beneath the waxy covering. During winter, pine needle scales are in the egg stage and will not feed until after hatching in May. At that time, the young crawlers move to a new location on the needle, develop their scale covering and begin to feed.

Old empty scales from past years remain on needles for years. These make it look like there are many more insects than there actually are. Watching for damage is as important as watching for the scales themselves. In most cases, natural enemies keep the population in check and treatment is unnecessary.

Another question was about protecting trees from voles or mice during winter. Placing hardware cloth around tree trunks in November is the best way to exclude rodents. Be sure to remove these each spring to allow for trunk growth.

Making sure mulch is not too deep around a tree can also help. Mulch piled against tree trunks may become a winter home for rodents, like voles and mice, who gnaw on trees during winter and girdle stems. If you have trees in your landscape with mulch piled against the trunk, pull the mulch about six inches away from the trunk. Ideally, mulch layers are only three to four inches deep.

With warm December days and lack of rain or snowfall, I continue to get questions about watering trees. The answer is yes to winter watering if the soil is dry and not frozen, and air temperatures are above 45 degrees Fahrenheit. Water early enough in the day so there is no standing water around trunks overnight.