

Protecting Trees from Winter Injury  
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Winter and drought conditions can be hard on trees. As long term investments, trees add much value to property and many benefits to people and communities. They are well worth protecting.

If a pest issue or weather stress causes an area of a lawn to die out, it can be repaired in a short time and fairly inexpensively.

When a tree is lost the cost to remove and replace it and the number of years it takes to reach the same size far exceeds lawn repair. And there is long term loss of energy conservation, stormwater mitigation, songbird habitat, mental health benefits and much more.

Preparing trees for winter, such as correct watering and the use of tree wrap on young trees, are steps taken to protect these valuable assets from injury or stresses likely to shorten their life span.

Nebraska's current drought conditions range from abnormally dry to extreme drought. This makes fall watering in the absence of rainfall even more important.

Along with an increased risk of winter desiccation and cold temperature injury, drought stressed trees are more susceptible to attack by harmful pests like insect borers and canker and wilt diseases.

Tree owners may believe their trees survived a drought year, but then dieback shows up three to five years later from these pest issues. At that point, little can be done for the tree since there is no control for canker or wilt diseases.

While even established trees benefit from fall watering, the priority should be evergreens, newly planted trees and young trees. Keep the soil moist, not saturated, 8 to 12 inches deep from the trunk to the trees dripline and preferably well beyond the dripline for larger trees.

Know that turf irrigation often does not moisten the soil deep enough to benefit trees, especially during drought years. Trees in irrigated lawns are still likely to need a deeper irrigation.

It is beneficial to use a 3 to 4 inch layer of organic mulch, like wood chips, in at least a 4 foot diameter ring around plants. Mulch conserves soil moisture and protects tree trunks from lawn mowers and grass trimmers. Make sure mulch is not piled against tree trunks.

The trunks of young, tender barked trees are prone to winter sunscald until the bark thickens. Protecting the trunks of young trees should be done after trees have dropped their leaves.

Sunscald appears as discolored and/or sunken bark, peeling bark or bark cracks. The damage occurs on the south or southwest side of trees during warm winter days. The sun heats up the trunk causing bark cells to lose some of their cold hardiness. These cells are then damaged as temperatures fall below freezing at night.

To protect young trees from sunscald, wait until after leaves have dropped to put protection in place. Then wrap tree trunks with tree wraps such as white paper, white plastic tree spirals, or white corrugated tree guards. White is recommended as it helps reflect sunlight.

If trunk wraps are used, be sure to remove them each spring. If left on too long, wraps can girdle young trees, attract insects, and moisture may build up beneath tree wraps to promote decay organisms.