

Prevent Common Issues in Younger Trees

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If you planted a shade tree in the last few years, take a close look at it. If it has two main trunks, called co-dominant stems, remove one before the tree becomes too large.

Co-dominant leaders or trunks are two upright stems of equal size. According to John Ball with South Dakota State University, as these two stems grow, they expand in size and eventually become pressed together at their base.

The stems do not graft together into one trunk, but remain two separate trunks with bark imbedded between them. This creates a weakness which results in a crack that can eventually cause the tree to fail in wind or ice storms.

The solution is to prune the tree to a single leader when the fork begins to form, ideally in the first few years after planting. Once these stems become too large, over 6-inches in diameter, removing one results in an odd-shaped tree or a wound that may not seal and can lead to decay in the tree.

If you planted a tree in the last few years and it is still staked, remove the staking material. Ideally, young trees would not be staked at all. However, because homeowners like to plant larger trees, even though smaller trees would grow and perform better; and because we live in windy Nebraska, staking for one year may be needed.

If a tree is staked too tight or for too long, it may not develop the strength and resistance needed to grow in windy Nebraska. It is by moving with the wind as the tree grows that allows trees to have wind resistance, or basically the ability to bend with the wind.

If you planted a tree in the last few years and any mulch you applied around the base at that time is gone, add more. A ring of organic mulch, not landscape fabric and rocks, improves soil over the years along with conserving moisture and maintaining a cooler soil for improved root growth.

A ring of organic mulch, at least four to six feet in diameter and only about four inches deep, protects tree trunks from lawn mowers and weed trimmers. If you used rock as mulch, be sure the rock is not up against the trunk which can wound young trees as they grow. Better yet, replace the rock and landscape fabric with organic mulch.

If you planted a tree in the last few years and have been fertilizing it with nitrogen, most likely you should stop. Most Nebraska soils are fertile enough for tree growth. If a tree is growing in a fertilized lawn, the tree is already receiving more nitrogen than it needs. Over-fertilizing increases a tree's susceptibility to diseases and insects.

If you planted a tree in the last few years and have not done any pruning, inspect the tree for needed pruning. June is a good time to prune. Do not over-prune a young tree, but spread it out over a few years or more. Look for branches growing towards the center of the tree or branches that will eventually rub against another branch to create a wound. Remove these before they cause issues.

Another issue to look for are branches with included bark. These are branches where the attachment to another branch or the trunk is very narrow. In these cases, bark can become included rather than pushed up to form a branch bark ridge.

On such branches, bark tissue forms between the trunk and branch leading to a weak attachment similar to co-dominant stems. Over time, but before branches become too large, branches with included bark are best removed. To help identify included bark, do a search on the internet and look for images of this issue.