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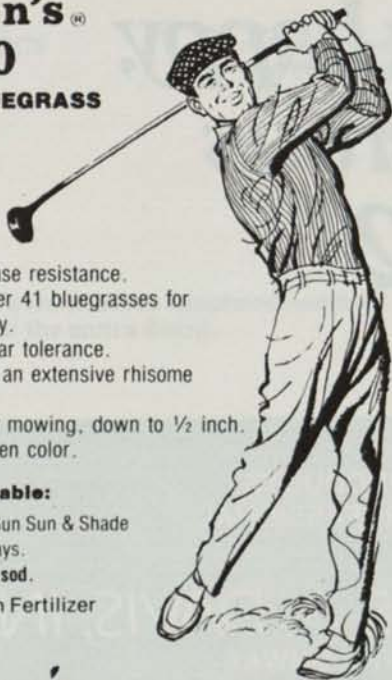
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IN YOUR GARDEN

EVERGREEN NEEDLE LOSS HEAVY

Unusually heavy needle loss is being seen on narrow-leaf evergreens throughout the Midwest.

Evergreens are so named because of their habit of keeping leaves (needles) through the winter. However, according to James A. Fizzell, University of Illinois Horticulturist in Cook County, evergreens shed their needles on a regular schedule, sloughing off old ones as new ones sprout. Under normal conditions, the needles are produced in the spring and live 2 or 3 years when sufficient new growth has taken place on the tips of the branches, these older needles in the center drop off, having served their purpose of photosynthesizing carbohydrates for the tree.

Arborvitae and white pine, for example, drop needles when the needles are two years old. They have a 'needle life' of two years. Other trees have longer needle lives. That of the bristlecone pine is 8 to 15 years.

Normal needle drop occurs during late spring and summer and is usually not noticed because of the density of new growth hiding it.

During the last few weeks, University of Illinois Extension offices throughout northern Illinois have received a tremendous number of calls from distressed plant owners reporting browning and dropping of needles from all types of evergreens.

Inspection of many of these plants reveals no diseases or insects but in some cases, late shedding of two and three year old needles. Under normal conditions these needles should have dropped last summer. In other cases, early shedding of needles has resulted where plants are standing in water or are in poorly drained soils.

Weather conditions have been anything but normal for at least the last two years. We have experienced two unusually mild winters and two wet summers since some of these needles were produced.

Current season growth on affected plants is generally normal and healthy. In the case of delayed needle drop, the older, affected needles have been exposed to very little stress since they were formed. Since disease or insect problems are not involved, we can assume the postponed needle drop resulted from the unusually favorable growing conditions.

In the case of either early or delayed needle drop, plants are in no danger as long as the current season's growth at the tips of the branches is healthy and normal. If the new growth is weak or is turning brown, root injury or canker disease may be involved and a tree expert should be contacted.

While we don't know all the factors involved, we do know plants respond in various ways to their environment. Sometimes the effect of weather conditions isn't easily predicted.

Make sure your plants are adequately but not over watered and if possible protect susceptible plants from winter wind and sun so your plants keep their needles as long as possible. But don't be alarmed if you see needles drop now and then.

James A. Fizzell, Sr. Extension Adviser

WANTED

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Sue Ekstrom