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Protect Trees from Winter Injury Now

by James Fizzell

University of Ill. Extension Service

The fact that winters are tough on trees and shrubs is an understatement. This summer we saw the effects of the winter as plants expired from delayed reaction to damage. Plants girdled by rodents, or with roots injured by excess water or low temperatures, can live quite awhile before the stored foods are used up. Then when least expected, they die.

You can avoid many of the winter problems by preparing now. To reduce damage from mice, remove all grass and weeds around the trunks of the trees and shrubs. Use hand clippers on vegetation you can't cut with a lawn mower. Be sure not to nick the bark. Unmowed vegetation provides cover for field mice which eat the inner bark of trunks and roots, frequently killing fruit trees.

Rabbits eat the bark off the trunk and any branches within reach, particularly on young fruit trees. However, they do not bother old trees which have developed heavy outer bark. Either chemical repellants or mechanical barriers are recommended for protection from rabbits. Spray the repellant on trunk and lower branches as recommended on the label. Chemicals are more effective in protecting shrubs than mechanical barriers. For trees, use chicken wire or hardware cloth to form a cylinder around the trunk. The cylinder should be at least two inches from the trunk and high enough to provide protection in the event of heavy snow cover. Or, wrap the trunk with newspaper, waterproof paper, or tree wrap.

Wrapping the trunk will also help protect trees from winter sun scald, and will benefit even older trees not subject to rabbit damage. Wrapping the trunk will also help protect trees from winter sun scald, and will benefit even older trees not subject to rabbit damage.

Trunk wrapping does not keep the trunk warmer, but provides shade from the winter sun which could elevate the temperatures of the inner bark to the point where it begins growing even in mid-winter. When the sun sets, temperatures rapidly drop to freezing or lower; this causes ice crystals to form in the inner bark, killing it. Such injury usually occurs on the south or southwest side of the trunk, the area most likely to be warmed by winter sunlight, and may not become apparent until the next summer. Maples and other thin bark varieties are very susceptible to this kind of injury. Some nurseries are using white paint on trunks as protection from winter sun damage.

Remove tree wraps when growth starts in the spring as they provide cover for insects which may injure the trunk during the growing season.

It is equally important that evergreens and newly planted trees and shrubs go into winter adequately watered. Plants standing in water drown, but those in parched, dry soils won't survive either. Roots continue to grow as long as soils remain unfrozen. Evergreens lose water from their leaves on bright winter days. If predictions are correct we are in for a severe winter. Evergreens that suffered from the cold and winds last year may need help to survive this year. Screens of lath or burlap to protect exposed evergreens, or anti-desiccants such as wilt proof might mean the difference between getting a plant through the winter and losing it outright.