

ASK THE EXPERT

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Why lilacs won't bloom

Problem: We are a small company doing a number of landscape activities. We pruned some lilac plants which were overgrown and unsightly. We pruned most of the old canes. The plant produced new growth but there were no flowers. The clients are upset and we are concerned. (N.Y.)

Solution: Like many landscape plants, lilac plants require some pruning every now and then to maintain their landscape beauty. In your situation, you removed most of the older canes to ground level. This practice is all right as long as you don't expect the new growth to produce flowers.

Lilacs require three- to four-year-old stems and branches to produce flowers. Since you removed all of the old plant materials, the plant failed to produce flowers on young new growth. It may take three to four years for new growth to mature and then produce flowers. During this recovery period make sure that the plant gets proper fertilizing, watering, mulching and pest management as needed to improve plant health.

In the future, put the lilac plants on a three- to four-year cycle for pruning, and prune about a third of the mature plant material.

For example, if a lilac bush has 10 multiple stems, remove no more than three stems in one year. Remove about a third the next year. These old three- to four-year woody tissues will maintain the flowering cycle.

Pruning after stress damage

Problem: Should any pruning be done to trees following severe drought or frost damage? (Calif.)

Solution: Trees damaged by severe drought or frost may require some pruning. The buds and cambium of trees affected by drought and/or frost can be examined for viability. If they are discolored and dry there is little chance for recovery. However, I have seen sweetgum recover after the cambium turned a butterscotch color as a result of cold temperatures. There is also the possibility that latent or adventitious buds may produce new growth when lateral buds are killed. Therefore, it is best to wait until new growth occurs before pruning.

Reports also indicate that the effect of severe drought and/or frost can continue to affect the overall health of plants for several years. Shallow-rooted, newly-transplanted or even large established trees can be affected by exposure to extremes in moisture and/or temperature. Due to these abiotic stress factors, trees will be stressed and weakened and become susceptible to canker diseases and/or mite infestation. Along with corrective pruning, severely affected trees can be further helped by providing proper fertilizing, watering, mulching and pest management as needed.

Treating for birch borers

Problem: We have seen a number of birch trees dead or dying in many landscapings. We think it is due to bronze birch borer damage. How can we identify and manage birch borers? (Mich.)

Solution: We (in Ohio) have also seen a large number of birch trees affected by bronze birch borer. This insect establishes on stressed and weakened trees, which often occurs when trees aren't tolerant of site conditions.

White birches are better adapted in Canada than in the U.S. Exposure to excessive heat and/or drought reduces tree vigor, predisposing it to secondary pests. In addition, poor soil conditions and other pest problems such as leaf minor aphids further weaken birches, increasing the potential for borers.

Bronze birch borers are black, half an inch long. Sun-loving, the beetles crawl on the trunk during late May/early June. They deposit eggs on bark which hatch in two weeks. The larvae, a flat-headed borer, tunnels under the bark and occasionally into the xylem to molt and overwinter. Larvae development is completed in one to two years.

Adults emerge only from dead wood leaving a characteristic "D"-shaped exit hole. Birch trees die from the top downward and welts grow on the trunk and branches.

Valuable trees can be protected by treating with materials like Turcam or Dursban in late May and early- and mid-June. Treatments should be made when adults lay eggs and repeated at least once at three week intervals.

Provide proper watering, fertilizing, mulching and pest management as needed to improve plant health.

Storing horticultural oil outdoors

Problem: Can horticultural oil be stored outdoors during the winter without being heated? (Ohio)

Solution: Horticultural oils can be stored outdoors. However, if the oil containers are small—such as five gallons—it is not a good idea. The product(s) should be warmed indoors for several days prior to use the following spring. Make sure that the oil has not spoiled.

In general, spoiled pesticides may show discoloration and/or precipitation at the bottom of containers. If in doubt, do not use suspected oil without checking with experts or the manufacturer first.

Read and follow label specifications for better results.

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Questions should be mailed to ASK THE EXPERT, LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT, 7500 Old Oak Boulevard, Cleveland, OH 44130. Please allow 2 to 3 months for an answer to appear in the magazine.