

WINTER PROTECTION FOR YOUNG TREES

This year has been difficult for trees and it is likely that many young and even mature trees sustained possible root damage due to stressful conditions. As with any plant, it can take time for the effects of root damage to appear in the branches, stems and foliage and next year we may start to see more of this year's damage. Considering this, it is important to take some proactive steps to reduce plant stress and the risk of any further damage to young trees.

Tree Wraps

Applying a tree wrap from the soil to the start of the first branches will protect recently planted and young trees from sunscald throughout the winter. Sunscald typically occurs on the south and southwest side of trees during late winter. The warm sun can heat the bark during the day and in fact the sunny side of the tree can be up to 40 degrees warmer than the shaded bark. As the bark warms it causes a loss in cold hardiness as cells become active again. This causes susceptibility to freezing damage when temperatures drop at night.

Trees with smooth young bark such as honey locust, fruit trees, ash, oak, maple, linden and willow are susceptible to sunscald and may show signs such as cracking bark and discoloration if sunscald occurs.

Another advantage of tree wraps is the prevention of damage from critters like rabbits who love to munch on that new bark during the winter period. Even if you don't wrap the trunk it is still a good idea to put up a wire or mesh barrier to prevent critter damage.

Put the wrap on in the fall and remove it in the spring after the last frost. Newly planted trees should be wrapped for at least two winters and thin-barked species up to five winters or more.

Water and Mulch

Even though we've had a little rain lately it is going to be important to monitor soil moisture levels over the winter period especially for evergreens and young or stressed trees. Remember that strong winter winds pull moisture out of plants and can cause desiccation on plants if the soil is dry.

It's a good idea to give trees one last deep watering before putting hoses away for winter. Set the hose to a slow drip and allow the moisture to soak deeply into the soil around the rootzone. Getting the moisture to a depth of 12 inches or more is desired and a long screwdriver can be used to check how far down the moisture is reaching. Water absorbing roots are killed when soils reach 28 degrees F. For this reason roots near the soil surface may not survive a cold winter, so we must rely on roots that are deeper and provide moisture they can absorb. Remember to take advantage of any warm winter days to check soil moisture around trees and water if needed. It is recommended to check the soil once a month through the end of winter.

Mulching is also a recommended practice. Take time to freshen up and apply more mulch if needed around trees once the ground has frozen as this helps reduce large ground temperature fluctuations around the roots. A 3 to 4 inch layer of mulch is recommended and should cover an area 3 to 4 times the size of the rootball on young trees.