



Winter Tree Management

Winter is a great time to take stock of the condition of your trees. The leaves are gone and it is easier to see issues that may have developed over the past year. Tree management has become more important as severe weather events have become more frequent and as emerald ash borer has arrived. Trees that are well maintained are less likely to have problems.

Here are some things you may wish to add to your winter tree management program:

Start a tree diary. As you, your staff or volunteers are traveling throughout the community, write down things that you see that might need further investigation. Create a central log where these observations can be tracked. A simple appointment entry on a computer calendar accessible to all can trigger a re-inspection. The tree diary should be kept all year. During the summer months it is easy to see dead leaves or bare branches. Observations recorded throughout the year will be a ready-made list when time allows for a more in-depth inspection. Obviously, if you see something that could pose a problem, don't wait until later to resolve the situation.

Inspect trees from every angle. From a municipal perspective, it is usually not possible to inspect every tree from every angle more than once a year, but a community-wide risk assessment should be conducted annually. Winter may be a good time to get that assessment accomplished. An excellent resource on risk assessment is [Urban Tree Risk Management: A Community Guide to Program Design and Implementation](#). Another is the [Tree Risk Assessment](#) developed by Purdue University.

Rotate inspection and management. Divide your tree inspection/management into zones, which may be determined by financial resources or staff availability. Inspection frequency should be at least once per year. Management frequency should depend on the needs to be addressed. Trees that have been observed to have problems should be prioritized and inspected more often.

Prune trees while they are dormant. Winter is a good time to prune, and while you are at it you can inspect the rest of the tree. Winter, often a slow season, may also be a good time to allocate staff to do this work. Don't forget to make use of trained volunteers. A volunteer working with a trained staff member doubles your staff!

Update your tree inventory. You will need staff who are able to identify trees without their leaves. If you don't have someone who is trained to do this, consider sending them to a class

such as [The Morton Arboretum's Deciduous Trees In Winter](#). Another option is to have a professional arborist work with staff and volunteers to train them.

Keep an eye on delicate trees. Some species are more susceptible to winter damage than others. Branching structure on some tree species makes them more likely to break under frost or heavy snows. Know where these trees are planted and be sure to visit them after a heavy snow or frost. It is important that planting lists be comprised of species that are well adapted to our region.

Train volunteers to help with tree work. Volunteers can do ground work such as watering, mulching and hand-pruning. They can also be trained to help keep an eye on what is going on in the community. They don't need to be the first line of defense, but they can be an extension of your staff.

Minimize salt exposure. Salt can be very hard on trees. Try to keep salt levels as low as possible. Use wetting agents and alternative deicers to reduce impacts to trees. Consider protecting evergreens from salt spray with canvas or burlap.

Protect tender bark from wildlife browse. Consider putting tree protection over the bark to keep wildlife from browsing on bark or small limbs. Screen wire or hardware cloth can be used to protect the bark from browse. Be sure the protective barrier is high enough to keep wildlife away after a deep snow.

Our trees are one of our best community assets. Their protection and careful management is the key to keeping them healthy.