

Winter Tree Care for Your Home

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Trees need love and care even during the winter months. And this winter, attention to trees is more important because we have had little rain or snow.

Ideally, roots, that remain active even in frozen soils, are protected from fluctuating winter temperatures by a layer of snow. After a severe summer drought, this winter is not starting out in the best of conditions. The December average snowfall is generally between 6-8 inches but we have yet to see any measurable accumulation across much of the area leading us into a potential snow drought this winter. The higher than average temperatures mean we need to take extra precautions to protect our valuable trees.

To start, a wide, even layer of mulch, applied in fall or early winter, can help insulate soil over the roots of any tree. Watering through the mild temperatures until soil freeze will also prevent winter and spring stress. This is especially important with young trees that are still struggling to establish their root systems in the soil.

Deciduous Trees (Trees that Lose their Leaves):

Deciduous trees become dormant in the fall when they drop their leaves. This lessens the ability of water escaping a tree through the leaves and helps a tree retain important nutrients. Older trees require less maintenance beyond watering through the fall and in mild stretches of winter days. If it snows and remains on the ground, the need to water is negated, as roots are insulated from the cold temperatures and will receive moisture as the snow melts.

Younger trees, on the other hand, may need more protection, as their thin bark is much more susceptible to several kinds of damage.

Sunscald, an injury similar to a sunburn on humans, is caused by high temperatures from intense sunlight which warms the tissues of trunk. The bark, usually on the southwest side of a tree trunk, is cracked and discolored and the tree tissue may die.

Frost cracking is caused by the expansion and compression in the tree tissues due to temperature fluctuations. Frost cracking is generally less damaging and more likely to heal over than sunscald.

Animal damage often occurs in periods of heavy snow, when smaller animals find it difficult to forage for food and are likely to eat the bark or other tender tissue of young trees. Animals can burrow beneath the mulch or snow, or during periods of heavy snow accumulation allow them to reach higher on a tree's bark. If feeding is severe enough and the animals eat all the way around a trunk killing the tree. Damage from larger animals, such as deer, is also problematic during the winter and can be an issue during heavy snowfall.

One way to protect young trees from animals and sunscald is to wrap their trunks with protective materials. Wrap the tree when temperatures still are relatively mild, using wide corrugated white plastic tubing. The wrap must be loose so air can circulate inside it preventing moisture from building up around the stem, which can encourage decay.

Remove any wrapping in early spring to let the tree's bark breathe. Left on, it can cause stunted growth and damage during warm months. Once the tree is old enough to have thick, protective bark, wrapping no longer is necessary.

Although, wrapping has not been proven effective against frost cracking and there is still much scientific debate over its merits, anecdotal evidence, and observations by gardeners, suggest this practice is still worth doing.

Evergreens (Trees That Keep Their Needles or Leaves)

Conifers and other evergreens are much more susceptible to damage than deciduous trees. The retention of their foliage makes evergreens prone to desiccation as they are still actively holding water within their needles..

Winter burn can occur when soils are frozen and an evergreen is exposed to cold wintery winds. This exposure causes moisture to be drawn away from the tree killing foliage. Other types of burn include **snow burn** when snowpack melts and then freezes encasing foliage in ice. Using an anti-desiccant, like paraffin wax, will help protect sensitive foliage. If a tree is newly planted or small it can also be protected by covering the tree in burlap.

Salt damage affects needles and changes the pH of the soil around evergreens from acidic to more basic or neutral state which harm the growth of the tree. This is very common in evergreens planted close to major roadways where salt is used to deice the street. To prevent salt damage, plant conifers away from roadways, walkways or doorsteps where salt is likely to be used to melt ice.

Without the protection of snow, evergreens are highly vulnerable to temperature fluctuations and to drying out, killing the foliage. Avoid planting evergreens in exposed or windy sites, where they are more likely to dry out and water during mild temperature stretches.

Professional Tree Care

Winter is a great time to call in an ISA Certified Arborist to inspect your tree for shape, form and dead branches. Although a tree can be inspected at any time of year, winter provides a unique opportunity for an arborist to view the tree without leaves in the way. Pruning can be done effectively and efficiently during the winter months without the worry of causing damage to understory plants.

Proper watering goes a long way in preventing winter injury to trees and ensuring a successful start of the growing season in the spring. Combined with that even layer of mulch and these tips, it gives you trees the best chance to grow properly, reducing stress, which will help provide the benefits of beauty, shade, and increased property values.