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Protecting Trees and Shrubs in the winter

In nature, trees and shrubs take care of themselves - the strongest survive and the others become part of the cycle of life. In our yards, we rely on our plantings to enhance and beautify our personal environment. We use plants in our landscapes that wouldn't naturally grow in that setting or in our climate. To help insure that our trees and shrubs have a good chance to do their best, we often have to provide protection for some plants from our Michigan winters. Methods of protecting trees and shrubs in winter vary, depending on the type of damage you are trying to prevent.

What causes winter damage?

Cold temperatures, ice/snow, wind, salt and animals can all cause considerable damage to your trees and shrubs.

What kind of damage is caused by cold?

If your plant is marginally hardy in our climate, cold temperatures alone can kill back the tender tissues. But even hardy plants can be damaged by sun scald, winter browning of evergreens, die back, root injury, and heaving.

What is sun scald?

Even on the coldest winter day, the sun can reflect off the snow onto landscape plants and warm the tissue enough to thaw; then the sun sets and the temperatures drop, freezing the plant tissue again. On young trees, this alternate freeze/thaw cycle can cause vertical splits in the bark on the trunk. This is a problem on most young trees, but is most common on maples.

Can I prevent sun scald?

You can wrap the trunks of susceptible trees and prevent almost all splitting. There are several kinds of tree wrap available. The easiest and least expensive is a neutral brown color and comes in several length rolls. You simply start wrapping around the base of the trunk and work your way up as far as you can reach or to the lowest branches. You can also get plastic tubes that can be slipped around the lower section of the trunk, but they can leave too much of the trunk exposed.

When should I put on the tree wrap?

Tree wrap should be in place before the snow flies and off as soon as the snow is gone. Protect your tree every winter until the tree has begun to develop a thick bark (this may be several years).

Is there anything I can do if the bark has split?

Splits usually don't cause any long lasting damage. Carefully trim off any dead bark. It won't reattach itself and

will be a site for decay. Wounds that are elliptical in shape, like a football, will heal the quickest. Unless the tree is an oak or elm, pruning paint or sealer is not recommended. The tree will form a callous around the edges of the wound that will grow toward the center.

What causes evergreens to brown in the winter?

When it is windy and sunny in the winter, evergreen foliage can lose moisture that it cannot replace with the ground frozen, resulting in browning. To help minimize this browning, be sure your plants have been well watered all season, right up until the ground freezes. Avoid planting evergreens in a windy location where they receive the direct afternoon sun in the winter.

How can I protect evergreens from winter-burn?

The only way to protect trees that are planted where they might winter-burn is to put up a barrier of some sort. A loose-weave burlap can be wrapped around the plant or stretched across stakes in the ground forming a screen.

Is there anything I can do if my plants have been winter-burned?

It's best to wait until the new growth develops in late spring before taking any action. Brown needles will not recover and will either be shed or have to be pruned out. New growth may cover much of the damage. Keep the plant well watered and fed throughout the growing season.

What about the ice and snow?

Evergreens can be damaged by heavy snows or ice buildup. On trees such as spruce, the branches will usually bend and recover. Plants with upright branching such as arborvitae and junipers, can split and break.

Can I prevent ice and snow damage?

Sometimes it's possible to reach inside evergreens and tie branches up with something soft. (Panty hose are great for ties, since they are strong, flexible, soft and don't degrade readily.) On smaller landscape plants, you can wrap the outside loosely, like lacing a shoe.

I've heard animals can damage landscape plants. Is that true?

Actually, rodents and deer can do extensive damage to trees and shrubs as they forage for food during the winter. Rodents can be kept from gnawing on trees by encircling the base of the trunk with 1/4" gauge hardware cloth or screen wire. The wire cylinder should be tall enough to extend at least a foot above the deepest expected snow. When this isn't practical or possible, you may want to try using repellents such as Tree Guard, Ropel or Hinder. Tree Guard is more expensive, but will stick to the plants for several months at a time.

Is there a good way to keep the deer from chewing on my landscape plants?

Unless you can fence the deer away from your plants, you will have to use a repellent. Most of the commercial repellents work either by giving off an offensive odor (such as Deer Away).

Is there anything I can do to prevent salt damage?

While there are some varieties of plants that are tolerant of low levels of salt, nothing will withstand very much. In fact, salt can actually be used as an herbicide. Avoid planting where salt will be used or where there might be salt runoff.

Will mulching help my plants make it through winter?

Mulch can definitely help minimize damage done to the roots by the alternate freezing and thawing.