

UNL Extension: Acreage Insights

Acreage eNews-October 2012

<http://acreage.unl.edu>

Fall Care of Trees

By [Sarah Browning](#), UNL Extension Horticulture Educator



Our trees have been through one of the hottest and driest summers on record since the 1930s, and many have been damaged even through the effects may not be seen until next year. Even though temperatures are cooler, dry conditions have not improved much and woody plants require more time and water to fully rehydrate.

Soon they will have to endure Nebraska's equally difficult winter conditions. Summer's drought stressed trees will face dry, open periods with little snow cover, mid-winter warm spells followed by very cold conditions, and drying winds that are all typical of a Nebraska winter. Plants continue to lose water through their stems and leaves throughout winter. If trees are dry going into winter, and this winter's conditions are as dry as last years, then branch and twig dieback or leaf scorch will be likely.

You can prepare your trees for the coming winter by following a few simple steps. Small investments of your time and energy now can pay-off in a big way later on by yielding a healthy and structurally sound tree.

Here are some important things you can do to winterize your trees.

- Monitor the amount of weekly precipitation we receive, whether rain or snow. Water whenever we do not receive an inch of precipitation per week throughout fall and winter when soils are not frozen. A deep soaking every two weeks is adequate for most trees in unirrigated landscapes with clay soil. Deeply water trees with a slowly running sprinkler left in place long enough to moisten the soil 18 to 24 inches deep. Apply the water slowly so it can soak in and not run off. Move the sprinkler to a new location until the entire area beneath, and a several feet outside the tree's drip line has been watered.
- Stop fertilizing. Trees and shrubs need to be hardened off before going into winter. Succulent, new growth triggered by late summer fertilization is much more susceptible to

winter burn and leaf scorch.

- Once trees have gone dormant, remove or correct structural faults that are clearly visible. Remove damaged, dead or dying twigs, branches, and bark. However, be conservative in the amount of branches you remove this fall. Plants may have gone dormant earlier than usual due heat and drought. If in doubt whether a branch is dead or dormant, wait until spring and watch for new growth. Also, remove suckers and watersprouts that have grown on the tree's trunk or branches.
- Spread a 3-4 inch thick layer of coarse organic mulch, like wood chips in a 3 to 6 foot diameter area around the base of the trunk to blanket the soil. This helps conserve valuable moisture and minimizes harmful winter temperature fluctuations around the tree's roots.
- Prevent sunscald on young, thin-barked trees by shading the south and west face of the tree's trunk with a white painted piece of wood, pounded into the ground in front of the tree. Or use a section of black drain tile, slit down the side, then fit around the tree's trunk.
- Protect trees from rabbit and vole damage by wrapping the trunks with ¼ inch hardware cloth. The cylinders should extend higher than a rabbit's reach while standing on the expected snow depth, and stand 1 to 2 inches (2.5 to 5 cm) out from the tree trunk. Usually a height of 2-3 feet is sufficient. Bury the bottom edge of the cylinder 2-3 inches in the soil to prevent voles from going under it.
- Consider applying an antidessicant or anti-transpirant. These products, when properly applied, form a protective layer on leaf and stem surfaces slowing the rate of winter water loss. This is particularly helpful on plants susceptible to winter desiccation, such as boxwood and arborvitae, or fall planted trees & shrubs. One such product is called Wilt-Pruf, a liquid pine oil polymer that forms a clear, flexible coating on plant leaves and stems, but does not interfere with normal plant respiration or photosynthesis. Use the winter application rate and spray plants thoroughly AFTER they have hardened off and become dormant, usually late November or early December. Read and follow all label directions carefully, particularly the re-application recommendations, to avoid plant damage and maintain the product's effectiveness throughout the winter.

Trees are important investments in your landscape and they do require a small amount of care. For the sake of your tree's quality of life and your own, take a few minutes to winterize your tree.