

Winter Evergreen Tree Care

By
Scott Hininger
University of Wyoming Extension
Sheridan County
October 21, 2014

Starting sometime from now until this spring we will start noticing some evergreen trees especially Rocky Mountain Junipers starting to turn brown. This is generally caused by winter desiccation (the drying out or loss of water from plant tissue (leaves, twigs, needles)). This is the main reason we have "winter kill" here in Wyoming. We have such dry (humidity) winters along with warm spells during the winter. All trees transpire (give off water) year round even in winter, especially evergreens. The rate obviously goes down to very little but it still occurs during the winter especially when the air temperature is above freezing. As long as the ground is not frozen all perennial plants can use and need water.

In late winter, the wind can also cause desiccation of foliage. One thing we can do also do this time of year if we are concerned with our evergreens especially young or recently planted ones, is to use a product called an anti-desiccant spray. Typically, this waxy looking material is mixed with water and sprayed on. What it does is to apply a thin coating over the branches or needles so the plant does not transpire (give off water) as rapidly as it would normally. This can help considerably, especially those of you who have planted new trees this last year. The other benefit of using these products is they will control many types of insects especially scale and any overwintering eggs.

One other thing I was reading was adding hot pepper juice from either habanera or jalapeno peppers to this spray mixture. If you are having deer or rodent problems this may help, since they do not like hot pepper juice and the anti-desiccant spray will hold it on the trees or plants most all winter long instead of washing off.

The other question I have received is if my evergreen is turning brown then I should use a spray fertilizer, such a miracle grow. If the tree is having a problem either insect, lack of water, or other stress, that problem needs to be taken care of first. However, we do recommend keeping the tree as healthy as possible including proper watering, and a good fertilization program. If the tree is stressed and you add this spray fertilizer to it, the tree could start to grow fast and this could actually compound the problem. So be careful when adding this kind of fertilizer to evergreens. September or April is a good time to fertilize trees.

In addition, rodents, and other animals, can do their share of damage. This can be prevented to some extent by adding wraps to the trunks of trees. To control porcupines use a fence with an outward angle to keep them from climbing the fence and getting to the tree. Be especially on the lookout for vole activity, as these mice looking rodents will leave race ways in the grass and can eat the bark off of perennials this winter.

Winter is a great time to do some pruning of deciduous plants (plants that lose their leaves in fall). With no insect or disease activity and no foliage, it is easier to see the shape of the plant and safely prune, and inspect plants in the yard for damage. Be sure to prune out any diseased looking branches or double leaders. Make sure you do not leave any stumps, as the tree will not be able to heal round these.

Now is a good time to start thinking about expanding your garden or ordering seeds for next year. I have noticed a lot more interest in gardening the last couple of years, and by planning now you should be ready this spring with your plantings.

Trade or brand names used in this publication are used only for the purpose of educational information. The information given herein is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended, and no endorsement information of products by the University of Wyoming Extension is implied. Nor does it imply approval of products to the exclusion of others, which may also be suitable. The University of Wyoming is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution.