

Winter Watering is Critical for Healthy Trees

Although it is the middle of the winter, the City of Cheyenne Urban Forestry Division encourages property owners to give trees and shrubs some much needed water. This is especially critical for evergreens (spruce, pines, firs and junipers) that have recently experienced dieback due to the extreme cold we had in November. These trees are already stressed as a result of the freeze and are therefore more susceptible to additional winter desiccation.

Winter survival of trees and shrubs depends to a large degree on ample soil moisture levels throughout the year. This is also true during the winter months. Even though all trees are in a semi-dormant state, water needs to be applied to insure the trees have taken up sufficient amounts of moisture to prevent stress related to tree desiccation, that is, needle burn as the result of water loss in the winter.

Dry winter winds can cause water loss through the leaves on evergreens and the branches on deciduous trees to the point of causing significant limb die back or entire tree mortality, according to Lisa Olson, Director of Urban Forestry for the City of Cheyenne.

Here are some tips to keep your trees healthy during the winter:

Give them a good drink: During extended dry periods (e.g., more than two weeks without snow cover), when the temperature is above 40 degrees, provide supplemental water. Rather than simply run a hose to the base of each tree, water the area from just outside the trunk to the extent of the longest branches. Water slowly, with a sprinkler or soaker hose, at the rate of 10 gallons per inch of tree diameter.

Wrap the trunk: In Wyoming, thin-barked trees like honeylocust, ash, maple and linden are susceptible to sunscald and frost cracks because of drastic winter temperature fluctuations. To prevent bark damage, guard the trunks of younger trees up to the first branches using commercial tree wrap. Leave the wrap on until April.

Mulch the base: Apply 2 to 4 inches of wood chips, bark or other organic mulch near the base of the tree, but not against it, to reduce soil evaporation, improve water absorption and insulate against temperature extremes. The City's compost facility has several varieties of mulch available for purchase, see their website for mulch descriptions, prices and hours of operation- <http://www.cheyennecity.org/index.aspx?nid=221>

Recycle leaves: Instead of disposing of autumn leaves, consider layering them around the base of each tree as mulch, or blend them into the yard with a mulching mower to retain nutrients.

Prune while trees are dormant: Late winter is the best time for pruning most tree species, but it can be done whenever trees are dormant over the winter months. Common reasons for pruning are to remove dead branches and improve form. Always prune just outside the branch collar – the point where a branch joins a larger one – and don't remove any branches without good reason.

Focus on younger trees. With less-extensive root systems, they are most likely to become stressed, so if you don't have time to care for all your trees, care for the young ones first.

