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## **With an Eye Toward Spring, It's Time to Attend to Winter Plant Damage**

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Before long, it will be spring. On Tuesday, March 20, we can start to trust that at some point soon, warmer weather is here to stay. It's way too soon to dig gardens or apply fertilizers, but plump magnolia buds and bright yellow willow branches will soon invite us to one of the first steps in spring land care. And that means it is time to inspect woody plants for winter damage, diseases, and insects.

According to Jeremiah Green, an arborist with The Care of Trees, an affiliate of the Davey Tree Company based in Hamden and Norwalk, a lot of people call its offices about evergreens this time of year.

"They see browning on the needles and worry the tree is dying," says Green. "In reality, some browning is completely natural—while other times it's a cause for concern."

He says that winter weather makes it difficult for evergreen trees to supply their needles with enough water, which leads to drying and browning. Most evergreens naturally drop some needles in fall and winter.

"White pines, for example, drop about one-third of their needles during the dormant season. That's their cycle," he says. "But if you see an entire side of the tree turn brown, and it is in direct sunlight or has a lot of wind exposure, the tree may have winterburn."

### **Problems Can Vary**

Winterburn results when intense winter sun heats needles and leaves above the ambient temperature. (Winterburn can affect broadleaf evergreens such as rhododendrons and boxwoods as well.) If the needles or leaves are already dry, the problem is worse. Damage usually appears on the southwest side, where sun is hottest. Sometimes only the tip of the needle turns brown while the base remains green.

Prevention of winter damage begins in the prior growing season, according to Green.

"Keep trees evenly watered throughout the growing season and into the late fall, particularly young trees," he says.

As for expensive or highly visible landscape plants, "Anti-desiccants can be helpful. They put waxy coating on leaves, which helps shield leaves from moisture loss," he says.

Green says people often call this time of year about spruce damage, particularly Colorado blue spruces.

"The tree is native to high altitudes and a drier climate," he says. "Outside of its native range, it can get a disease called cytospora canker."

The problem appears as cankers on the lower limbs and trunks, accompanied by white sap droplets. The lower branches lose needles and die in an irregular pattern.

“There’s no treatment for cytospora other than encouraging the overall health of the tree,” he says.

Early identification makes a difference.

March is also a good time to look for insects.

### **An Old Practice**

“Some signs include small holes in the bark and sawdust in the branches and on trunks,” says Green.

He recommends the use of “spring dormant oil,” a name that refers to the dormancy of the plants, not the oil. This horticultural spray can reduce the populations of spider mites, aphids, scales, several types of adelgids, lace bugs, and more.

“It’s an old practice that has stood the test of time,” he says. “It has extremely low toxicity and it doesn’t hurt beneficial insects because, for the most part, they haven’t emerged yet.”

Green’s definition of good tree care includes the possibility of selective pruning to remove dying branches. A steady water supply makes a big difference, especially to young trees. It is helpful to keep lime and lawn care treatments separate from tree areas. Lime raises pH, which is good for grass but not for most of our regional trees. Lawn fertilizers can burn the roots of young, newly planted trees.

It is also helpful to spread one-half inch of finished compost under branch drip lines, and cover with two to three inches of mulch. No mulch or compost should ever touch the trunk.

“Pine needles or leaf litter are great sources of mulch,” says Green, “but not gravel, rubber, or dyed mulch.”

Gravel adds no organic matter. According to Green, dyed mulches sometimes have a lot of termite pesticide, which can be bad for the trees.

If you decide to get help with pruning or spraying, remember that arborists are licensed in this state. The Connecticut Tree Protective Association provides a searchable database as well as a list: [ctpa.org/find-arborist](http://ctpa.org/find-arborist).