

Winter Tree Care

By Laura Simpkins, Colorado Master Gardener

It's another beautiful day in Colorado – sunny, warm, dry – no trace of last month's snow. A bonus winter day of blue skies and moderate temperatures, which is what attracted many of us to this area of the country. But the clear skies mean huge temperature fluctuations and no snow shoveling means that your trees are getting stressed.

What's the best thing that you can do for your trees in the winter? Water them – especially if they are newly planted. According to CSU fact sheet # 7.211 by J.E. Klett and C. Wilson, "Woody trees generally take one year to establish for each inch of trunk diameter." So baby your trees. If there has been little or no snow over the past month, hook up and drag your hose. Give your trees a good soaking at the drip zone, at a rate of approximately 10 gallons of water for each diameter inch of the tree. It is recommended that you water once or twice a month from October to March during dry periods. Just make sure that it is 40 degrees or warmer and water in the middle of the day so that the water can soak in before temperatures drop.

What's the second best thing that you can do for your trees to insure winter health? Prune them. Remove broken and weak branches. Shape and thin your trees and they will hold up better during those heavy spring and fall snows. If we get a heavy fall snow that hits before the trees lose their leaves, consider shaking your trees or knocking off the snow with a broom. If you do experience some breakage, prune the damaged areas to prevent future insect damage. Late winter or early spring – before bud break - is a great time to do some routine pruning.

Another winter precaution for your trees is tree wrap. Young, thin-barked trees such as honeylocust, maple, ash and fruit trees can be susceptible to sun scald. Wrapping trees for the first two to three winters after planting can prevent trunk injury. Damage "often occurs on the south and west sides of young trees that have not yet formed their protective corky bark. Mild winter daytime weather warms the cambium layer. The cells in the cambium then become vulnerable to low night temperatures." (Roberta Tolan, Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Agent) Wrap them in the fall and make sure to remove the wrap each spring.

Remember your trees on during our warm, dry winter days. You will reap the benefits of healthy trees throughout the growing season and enjoy their shade and beauty during the heat of summer. In the immortal words of Joyce Kilmer, "I think that I will never see, a poem as lovely as a tree."