

Winterizing your Landscapes

Winter will soon descend upon us. Hopefully you are taking measures to not only winterize your homes with extra caulk around leaky windows, a professional cleaning of your furnace, and a good gutter cleaning, but also taking the needed steps to winterize your landscapes.

Woody plants should be in the process of hardening off. By late summer, your prunings and fertilizer feedings should have been discontinued. Both of these practices encourage late, tender growth which can easily be killed off by frost and freeze. This you want to avoid.

To prevent rabbit and rodent damage on your landscape plants, install wire mesh around the trees or shrubs. Fruit trees, hawthorns, and newport plums are susceptible to rodent damage, and rabbits most enjoy purple-leaf plum, burning bush, viburnum, amelanchier, willow, dogwood, and spirea. In severe winters these animals can attack most any plant, so be sure to check your plants weekly for signs of damage. Rabbits and mice can girdle a tree by chewing around the bark. This can result in the death of a woody plant.

Many evergreens, such as arborvitaes, yews, white pine, and upright junipers, are susceptible to winter burn, especially on the side of the plant exposed to the most winter wind and sun. Moisture is pulled away from the foliage at a time when the ground is frozen, and the plant is not able to replenish it. This will result in browning or yellowing of the needles. To minimize this, water your plants in thoroughly at the end of November. Also, you can wrap burlap around a plant to help minimize sun and wind exposure.

Rock salt is often used to help with deicing our sidewalk and driveway areas. But rock salt can seriously injure or destroy plants.

Your nearby grass leaves, crowns, and roots can be destroyed. Nearby root systems of trees and shrubs can also be subtly damaged by high salt content in the soil.

On trees, especially maples, you might see stunted growth and/or leaf scorch by next spring or summer. With leaf scorch, brown tissue develops between the veining, and the edges of the leaves turn brown.

The roots of sugar maples are extremely sensitive to high salt content in the soil. The trees will slowly decline over a period of years and eventually die.

Salt spray from nearby streets and highways can accumulate on evergreen needles and deciduous tree limbs and twigs. Evergreen needles can turn brown and fall off, leaving only the current year's needles next summer. Salt poisoning on deciduous trees can cause bunchy twig growth and deformity in tree limbs or cause eventual death.

To help prevent the destructive tendencies of rock salt on your landscape plants this winter, reduce the amount of salt you put down or use the following salt substitutes:

1. Sand
2. Deicing products which contain calcium chloride
3. Granular plant fertilizer (This actually does a good job of melting ice, and if you don't throw an excess of it down, it might actually perk up a lot of nearby landscape plants next spring!)
4. Kitty litter (For traction on the driveway)

Here are a few other winterizing suggestions for your landscape:

1. After a heavy snowfall, go out and gently shake the snow from evergreens or use careful, upward sweeping motions to remove heavy snow. Work carefully because the frozen wood is brittle.
2. Inspect small trees for broken limbs and repair the damage as soon as possible so the wounds can begin to heal properly. Make clean cuts with sharp pruning tools. If a jagged or unclean cut is made, the damaged part will probably start to decay or rot.
3. Remove damaged shrub stems at ground level. Usually new growth will start from this spot in spring.
4. Ice and snow loads along with high winds can also damage larger trees. Damage to larger trees require more careful consideration, though. A homeowner must consider how severe the damage is and if he or she can safely and easily repair the damage alone. If not, a professional will have to be called in, which can be expensive. Check with a qualified arborist to see if your tree is worth saving. Besides the expense, a large tree could become hazardous or unsightly after repair work is done. Weigh it all out carefully.