

## Damaged Trees and Shrubs by Hungry Rabbits

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Many landscapes are designed to attract “backyard wildlife” , including rabbits. However, when those cute furry bunnies start eating our favorite pussy willow bush or young Jonathan apple tree, then we act more like the cartoon character of Elmer Fudd and want revenge on those pesky rabbits! In the last Tree Tips I discussed how some of the evergreens in our landscapes have brown needles due to the cold and stressful conditions this winter. The cold and heavy snows have also caused stress and hardship on wildlife. With the snow drifts melting and disappearing, there is more and more evidence of damage to shrubs and young trees by hungry feeding rabbits. With the heavy snow cover on the ground this winter, rabbits have had to feed more on woody stems than in some years when seeds and grass vegetation is available. This results in a higher number of stems of shrubs and small trees with thin bark being chewed on and snapped off. With snow drifts around the plants this feeding may take place on stems five to six feet off the ground.

If the chewing activity has occurred completely around the circumference of the stem, then from that point upward the plant will be dead. The feeding by the rabbits is on the green bark and the cambium tissue directly under the bark. This is green tissue is the living part of the woody plant and is the same part that beavers are after when they cut down a large tree. As a rodent, the teeth are made for gnawing on wood or seeds and rabbits teeth are very efficient in chewing through a young stem of a favorite shrub or fruit tree. These feeding locations on the stems will show up now as white areas on the stems where the green bark is eaten off.

If the damage is on woody plants like pussy willow, viburnums, burning bush, lilac, raspberries or similar shrubs, the loss is not so great. Prune off the damaged stems below the feeding location where there is the healthy green tissue. This will create a good area for new buds to break dormancy and sprout for new stems. Pruning shrub stems back to 4 to 6 inches above the root collar will work well. On landscape trees or fruit trees, the damage may be more severe. On thin barked shade trees like maples and lindens, if the rabbits have chewed on the stem and less than 75% of the circumference is damage, leave the tree to recover. Do not put any wound dressing or “paint” on the wound. If more than 75% is damaged, it will probably be necessary to replace the tree or you can try to salvage the tree by cutting it off as close to the ground as possible. This is a practice called “coppicing”. If the root system is healthy, then the tree will respond with sending up four or more sprouts. Over the course of the next several years then, selectively remove one or two of the poorest growing sprouts while always retaining the straightest, best growing stems that originate off the root system. Do not try to work with those that come off at a right angle to the original stem since these will have weak attachments and will fail as the tree stem gets larger and heavier. On fruit trees there is a greater risk of loss since many of these may be grafted and if the rabbits eat at or below the graft union, then you have lost the desired fruit tree and end up with the root stock. Cutting off at the ground and starting over is not an option with these plants.

Backyard wildlife like rabbits can be fun to attract and watch. Just like potential damage in gardens by these hungry critters, damage on landscape plants can be reduced by putting wire cages around highly prized plants. This needs to be done before the snows come so be prepared next fall and if you see a great deal of rabbit damage from this winter, keep it in mind and be prepared to protect those most susceptible plants next winter.