

Tree Tips Column for September 19, 2003

By Steve Rasmussen, Nebraska Forest Service District Forester

Fall Care for Trees Starts with Watering

With the end of the growing season here, and the cool weather with much needed moisture we finally received recently, many persons probably don't think watering their trees and shrubs this fall is necessary. The misconception comes from the thought that only during hot periods of the growing season is the water needed for plant growth and survival. However, even though the plants are beginning to go dormant above ground this time of year, root systems continue to grow and take up moisture until the ground freezes. This may be into December in some years. Also, the rains we have received in September now will not replenish the soil moisture that the plants had used all through the summer when we did not get much rain.

With two years of below normal rainfall, many soil profiles have very low moisture amounts. This makes it difficult for large growing plants like trees to keep all of the above and below ground parts alive. Early leaf color change and dropping this fall is an indication that some trees are still under moisture stress and need more water. Watering well in the fall helps the roots get water to the branches and buds to keep them hydrated and healthy through the dry winter months we have here on the Great Plains. If the buds and stem tissues do not have adequate water starting the winter, then there is a good chance those areas will die, dry out and not be alive to green up in the spring.

In addition, evergreens need good moisture in the fall and early winter to keep the needles from drying out during windy, dry winter months. Watering well with a small sprinkler placed under a large tree and moved every two to three hours under the branch crown or placing a garden hose and "trickle soaking" for two to three hours before moving it around are good ways to soak up the soil profile. If we do not get normal fall rainfall, then this should be done up until the ground freezes and is most important for the evergreens.

The other most important and best project to do for your trees before the ground freezes is to get wood chips and mulch around the base of the trees. Mulch at least a 4 foot circle around the trees for best results and more if the landscape design can incorporate a "mulch island" with trees, shrubs and perennial plants. The "islands" of mulch in the grass lawn are the best thing you can do for long lived plants like trees and shrubs. It gives them their own location for root growth while keeping the grass sod competition away. This also keeps lawn herbicides and the dreaded lawnmower a safe distance from young, sensitive trees and shrubs. Grouping your plants in these islands also helps with the mowing and lawn care since numerous individual plants do not need to be worked around.

Thoroughly watering and mulching with wood chips are the two best actions you can do to help your tree, shrub and perennial plants make it through our dry, cold winters in good shape ready to green up and grow well next spring.

This is the last Tree Tips column for 2003. You can continue to get tree care and management information from your local nursery and garden centers, UNL- Cooperative Extension offices in each county, or my office with the UNL- Northeast Research and Extension office in Norfolk at 370-4024. Have a great end of the year and remember to water your trees/shrubs this fall!