

Guard trees against 'Winter Burn,' warns Arborist



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St. Andrews-based arborist Guy Shelemy spreads some mulch around a tree on his property. According to Shelemy, evergreens around the Interlake have been suffering this year as a result of too little water.

Mulch, watering the best way to protect evergreens from dry conditions

By John Towns

There are some things you can generally count on – Wednesday comes after Tuesday, the sun will rise in the east and evergreen trees will be, well, green.

Except...when they're not.

St. Andrews-based arborist Guy Shelemy has spent the last few weeks fielding almost a dozen calls a day from property owners who have noticed their spruce, pine and fir trees are suddenly turning brown or losing needles all together.

When calls starting coming in, Shelemy – who studied at the U of M and Assiniboine Community College and is the only International Society of Arboriculture certified arborist in the Interlake – set to work taking a look at what was causing evergreens to take on a significantly less-than-green appearance.

Testing revealed a number of fungal infections and nasty critters like spider mites and worms affecting trees, but increasingly, Shelemy says, trees are showing signs of not having had enough water. Excavations of roots revealed that they were cracked and dry, meaning that trees were shedding their needles in what Shelemy describes as a "survival mechanism" – attempting to get smaller to conserve what little water they do have.

"One of the things that people find surprising is that we've had several years of really wet weather, but we've had almost drought conditions this year," explained Shelemy. "When some people are digging, doing work in their yards, they find that they can still see moisture in the soil, but that moisture is anywhere from 10 to 14 inches below the surface. In shallow-rooting trees like spruce and evergreens, their roots don't reach that

far down, necessarily."

The big problem, according to Shelemy, is that if trees aren't getting the water they need now, they're certainly not going to get it over the winter – which means that come springtime, many of these thirsty trees are going to wind up with a condition called "Winter Burn," which could severely damage a tree because it will be going literally months without much water going in to its root system.

"It's called Winter Burn and it usually shows up in the late winter or early spring, during the freeze-thaw cycle," Shelemy explained. "This is something that usually shows up and people become aware of it after the damage has already been done – the best time for preventing damage like this is actually in the fall."

Shelemy is urging property owners to take action on these at-risk trees before deep frost sets in to the ground by spreading a layer of mulch about two inches deep around the base of trees that look like they're browning.

"For a lot of large rural yards it gets impractical to kind of drag a hose around, so one of the things that people can do is to spread a thin layer of mulch out around the tree," he said. "You don't need very much – in fact, if you use too much, you can trap moisture and not allow it to sink into the soil. Just about one or two inches is good."

Shelemy recommends putting the mulch about six inches from the base of the tree – having it right against the base could trap moisture against the trunk and lead to ideal breeding ground for fungus – to about a metre past the tree's outer branches.

Shelemy also says that if they're able to, property owners should pick their most-valued evergreens and water them about twice a week, starting around 30 centimeters from the trunk and thoroughly soaking the area to about one metre past the branches. Watering, he says, should continue until just before winter freeze-up.