

Conifers

A cup of hot chocolate on a cold day, sitting by the fire with family, and harvesting our garden always remind me of this time of year. Fall certainly is a wonderful time of year. Leaves are turning, the days can be very pleasant, and for some, hunting is in full swing. I always think that Fall is my favorite season, until Spring hits. This fall has seen some really interesting things happening with our conifers – primarily spruce and pine trees.

I first noticed a real issue a month or so ago when I traveled between Wolf Creek and Helena. All of the pines – at least those not dead at the hand of mountain pine beetles – had brown needles on the inside of the branches. All of the new growth from 2010 was still green. Similarly, spruces had random branches that were appearing to die back.

Trees can be complex in their reactions to environmental conditions, much like humans. Last fall, we saw extremely hot temperatures, followed by a cold snap that dipped below zero. Trees can take up to a year or more to exhibit signs of stress. One clear sign of stress in conifers is needlecast – when they shed a significant amount of needles. In a typical year, conifers will shed their fourth and fifth year needles. This year, due to the environmental shock of last fall, we are seeing trees shedding their second through fifth year needles.

Care for these trees should be similar to what we are always doing. We should make sure, if possible, that our trees are getting good, clean water in a deep watering cycle. That means trickle around the base of the tree for several hours so that the water can get through the soil down to the massive root systems. Watering trees like we water lawns is not effective in the trees are stressed or in a drought.

Needles will commence to falling off as the trees work out the stress themselves. With the new growth, they will recover from this. On spruce, it is not exhibited on each limb, but rather selected limbs will look “dead” and all the needles will be brown. This is simply the way spruce deal with the environmental stress. They too will most likely recover.

Along with these condition found on almost all spruce and pine trees in the county, there are still the common pests like mountain pine beetles, spruce budworms, and pine needle scales. Be watching out for these on your trees and if you are ever in doubt, feel free to contact me with any questions.

There is another alarming fungus I have been seeing on pine trees, though this is in rare cases. It is a black stain in the heartwood. Symptoms for this are when you see the entire top of a tree die. It is mostly found in Austrian pines. When you cut into the trunk at the dead area, you find this black stained wood. Trees should be topped and cut down to the first green swirl. There is no fungicide that is effective after the issue is found. Please contact me if you are finding this.

Now is the perfect time to go for a drive and see one of the most unique species of tree in the United States. I am talking about the Western Larch. Western Larch grows best in cool climates with southern slopes. It is used quite a bit in the construction industry because it is one of the hardest of the softwoods. On a recent drive across Highway 2, I could see them quite distinctly among the other trees. The larch, you see, is a deciduous conifer. That means that it's needles change color and shed each fall. New needles are then grown again in the spring. The shedding process makes it a deciduous tree. The needles make it a conifer. It is one of the few species that qualifies as both a deciduous and coniferous tree in the United States.

Our trees offer us much. They provide us protection from the elements, a natural beauty, and exchange oxygen for carbon dioxide. If you think your trees can be difficult to care for, go somewhere there aren't any trees. It will cause you to be grateful! Have a wonderful season!