Tips for Tree Care

Bill Meyer

*Winona State University*

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Fleetwood Mac immortalized the song, "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow." Let me tweak the lyrics to say "Don't Stop Thinking about Your Trees Today." Just because the leaves are falling and the temperatures are dropping, this is not the time to stop thinking about your trees. If you do, there may be no tomorrow for them.

Let's face it, the weather has been on a brutal roller coaster this year. Extreme conditions have been the rule. A record setting warm March was followed by an oppressively hot July. Many trees were lost during this period, while others suffered stress like symptoms such as premature leaf drop. The entire year has been very dry with the drought like conditions continuing into the fall. In the last few days we have started to see rainfall again. A very welcome sign. However, it is important to remember that precipitation is down over 8 inches for the season and it will take an unusually rainy late fall to make up these deficits.

With that in mind I would like to stray away from my usual featured trees on the WSU campus and instead offer a few suggestions on caring for the trees in our yards. Despite the fact that we are approaching late fall, important steps can still be taken to ensure our trees go into the winter in the best possible condition. As we enjoy the last of the colors of fall, we can help our trees regain their health as we approach winter.

Here are a few of the steps I take each fall to prepare my trees for winter.

First and most important, I continue watering my trees throughout October and often into November. When I water a tree, I make sure to water deeply and thoroughly. This will encourage proper root development. Depending on soil type and size of tree, it may take 45 minutes to 1 hour to water each tree. I have a very sandy soil so I can water longer. I concentrate on the trees that are 5 years or younger because I figure they don't have very deep roots. Watering in the late fall helps the root development which is active at this time of the year. The weather will dictate when to stop watering. If the soil has frozen for several days, it may be time to stop watering.

Along with watering the trees, I like to check the mulch. I look at the amount of mulch I have and add some if needed. A proper layer of mulch will help keep the moisture down in the root system and even help prevent cold temperature damage such as frost cracks and twig dieback above ground.

Finally, I like to protect my trees from the mice, rabbits and deer as much as possible. If I am trying to protect the trees from mice and rabbits, I use hardware cloth, a 1/2 inch by 1/2 wire screen that I use to protect the bark of younger deciduous trees. For deer protection I will pound posts in the ground and wrap chicken wire up 3-4 feet high around the tree. One last step I often employ is wrapping several of my special borderline hardy evergreens with burlap.

After all these steps have been completed, I will reward myself by going inside, grabbing a favorite beverage and relaxing in a comfortable chair, knowing that my trees are ready for old man winter.