

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Homan October 12, 2018

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Protect Your Plants this Winter

The cooler temperatures last week are a definite reminder that winter is coming. Many of us in the Post Rock District have already been faced with frost warnings. So how can we protect our plants and landscapes to survive the winter? Many plants, especially newly planted trees and shrubs will need a little help to make it through the winter. Here are some tips for getting your yard through the cold winter months.

If you planted a new tree in the last few years, it will need some extra care to be protected during our cold Kansas winter. Many young, smooth, thin-barked trees such as honey locust, fruit trees, ash, oak, maple, linden, and willow are susceptible to sunscald and bark cracks. Sunscald normally develops on the south or southwest side of the tree during late winter. Sunny, warm winter days may heat the bark to relatively high temperatures. Research done in Georgia has shown that the bark on the southwest side of the trunk of a peach tree can be up to 40 degrees warmer than shaded bark. This warming action can cause a loss of cold hardiness of the bark tissue resulting in cells becoming active. These cells then become susceptible to lethal freezing when the temperature drops at night. The damaged bark tissue becomes sunken and discolored in late spring. Damaged bark will eventually crack and slough off.

Trees often recover but need a little extra TLC, especially watering during dry weather. Applying a light colored paper tree wrap or plastic tree wrap from the ground to the start of the first branches can protect recently planted trees. This wrap should be applied in October to November and removed the following March. Failure to remove the tree wrap in the spring can cause girdling and be detrimental to the tree.

If you have perennial plants in your landscape they will also benefit from some winter protection. Mulching perennial flowers and strawberry beds protects them from the alternating freezing and thawing cycles over the winter. You can wait a while to mulch your flower beds, it's best to mulch after the plants have gone dormant and the soil freezes. This is usually around Thanksgiving. Use a layer of straw or even some shredded leaves as a winter mulch.

We also must protect our landscape plants from desiccation during the winter. Desiccation can also be described as winter burn. This happens when our plants don't receive enough moisture and dry out. Our winters often come with strong winds and little moisture, leading to desiccation. It is most common in evergreen species; these plants lose moisture through transpiration faster than their roots can replace it from the frozen ground. Evidence of winter burn shows up as browning and scorch on the tips of pine needles and leaf margins. Damage will be more severe on the side of the tree exposed to sun and wind. Make sure your evergreens have enough water until the soil freezes. If you have exposed trees or shrubs they should be checked first and might benefit from extra protection.

Your lawn will need some extra care before the soil freezes. If you have cool season grass remember to apply one last application of fertilizer in November. Use a quick release, high nitrogen fertilizer and your lawn will green up much faster in the spring. To care for your lawn during the winter, try to minimize walking on the grass. When our lawns are frozen or covered in snow, they can only tolerate moderate traffic. A heavily worn path will be compacted and slow to green up in the spring.

Take a little extra time and prepare your yard for winter. You will be rewarded in the spring with healthy and lush plants. If you have any questions about caring for your landscape this winter contact your local extension office.

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at choman@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (738-3597).