

What a Wisconsin Winter Can Do To Your Landscape

Wisconsin winters are often responsible for severe damage to our landscapes. Our plants endure cold temperatures, wind, heavy snow, salt, and hungry animals.

Cold temperatures can damage plants in several ways. Injury is more prevalent and more severe when low temperatures occur in early fall or late spring when low temperatures are of prolonged duration. Extreme fluctuations in temperature can be extremely destructive to plants throughout the fall, winter, and spring.

On cold winter days the sun can heat up the bark to the point of which an area of the bark becomes active. When the sun is blocked the bark temperature drops rapidly killing the entire area. This usually happens with thin barked and newly planted trees. It may not be until summer when you see the damage. Damage usually appears as an elongated, sunken, dried, or cracked area of dead bark, usually on the south or southwest side of the tree. You can reduce the chance of damage by wrapping the trunk with commercial tree wrap, plastic tree guards, or any other light-colored material; it will reflect the sun and keep the bark at a more constant temperature.

Some springs you may notice many evergreen plants that are off-color or brown; this is called winter burn. Winter burn can occur for a few different reasons. The number one way this occurs is due to no snow cover and low temperatures which causes the soil to freeze deep enough to stop water from being taken up by the roots of the evergreen. Winter sun and wind cause excessive foliage water loss that cannot be replaced resulting in dehydration of the plant tissue. Another way winter burn transpires is during bright sunny winter days the foliage warms up enough to become active, then the sun is quickly shaded and the temperature drops and damages the foliage. Foliage damage normally occurs on the south, southwest, and windward sides of the plant, but in severe cases the whole plant may be affected. Do not prune out the brown right away because the new buds are more cold-hardy than the needles and the new growth may fill in the area quickly. The best prevention for winter burn is to water all your evergreens well in the fall; do not let them go into winter dry. If the winter is very dry and you think they are starting to burn, cover them with pine boughs or burlap to reduce the effects of winter sun and wind.

Snow and ice damage can happen to any plant in the winter. Heavy snow accumulations can cause bending and breaking of branches. Multiple leader upright evergreens are usually the hardest hit. Damage can usually be reduced by tying the leaders together about two-thirds of the way up with rope or nylon stockings. Make sure you do not wrap the rope all the way around the stem because this can girdle the stem in later years and be more damaging than the snow could ever be.

Salt used for deicing can cause injury to all parts of your plant. Not only can it damage the foliage of evergreens but also the buds and stems of deciduous trees. In the spring salt runoff can injure roots and be absorbed by the plant. The best solution is not planting trees and shrubs in highly salted areas. Avoid areas where salt runoff collects or use salt tolerant species in that area. Some people use burlap barriers for protection from salt spray.

Our wildlife can cause great damage to our landscape in the winter. Mice, rabbits, and deer feed on the twigs, bark, and foliage. They can girdle trees and shrubs overnight and eat

shrubs to the ground. The best wildlife prevention is fencing. For rodents like field mice and meadow voles you need quarter inch mesh hardware cloth. For rabbits and deer chicken wire works well. Always make sure to go high enough so wildlife cannot get over the top in deep snow.

Although plant cold-hardiness and winter injury are common problems with Wisconsin winters, appropriate plant selection, proper site selection, and suitable practice and maintenance will significantly reduce or prevent severe injury or complete loss of your landscape plants.

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