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What Our Warm Weather Means for Trees

Last week I wrote about what our extreme cold and snow storms might have done to our trees. In case you missed it, the odds are that your trees were deep enough in their dormancy cycle that the cold did not affect them. Now we are in the midst of sunny, 60-degree days. What does this mean for our trees who just endured extremely cold temperatures to now have such warm weather?

First let's look at the dormancy cycle. When days start getting shorter and cooler, trees enter a pre-dormancy phase, where they are undergoing changes that prepare them to endure the cold. This process can take a while, and trees often reach peak dormancy in December or January. Once spring hits and temperature rise, plants start to de-acclimate to the cold, and undo the winterization processes from the fall. When temperatures hit 60-degrees they start to de-acclimate slowly, and when temperatures hit 70-degrees de-acclimate proceeds much faster.

So, while it might seem counterintuitive, our current warm weather is more worrying than the cold spell from earlier in January. Plants can lose their cold hardiness if there are unseasonably warm temperatures - especially for multiple days in a row. Some research suggests that it only take a few days of warm weather for trees to start waking up from dormancy.

Unfortunately, it is much harder for the tree to go back into dormancy, or re-acclimate, than it is to leave dormancy, or de-acclimate. Many trees can reacclimate to cold weather, but it requires a slow drop in temperatures for them to do so. Should the temperatures drop back down quickly in the coming weeks, some of our trees may be at high risk for winter damage.

There is not a lot that we can do to help our trees right now, as we cannot change the weather. If we experience a very quick drop in temperature, you can try covering shrubs and smaller trees with burlap or cloth to help keep them warm. Still, odds are you will have to deal with the frost damage that might occur. You might not know that your tree has suffered frost damage until later in the season when the growing season starts and the dead limbs become apparent.

While this is not the ideal situation, it is important to remember that frost damage does not usually kill healthy, well-established trees and shrubs. It only causes a temporary setback. Pruning off any dead or damaged branches and ensuring that your tree gets enough moisture and nutrients in the spring and summer can help it to bounce back.

If you have any questions or concerns about your trees or how to care for them, remember that you can always reach out to your local extension office for more guidance.