

Bugs and Blights of January

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Fall didn't fall. The leaves on trees did not form their abscission layer and fall this year on a whole host of trees. It's as if someone pushed pause and the whole annual leaf drop is waiting for the resume someone to push the resume button to be pushed. A lot of trees had lovely leaf drop as captured by this great photo coming into our office park by Julia Weise, CPH. But others, cherry, apple, willow, filbert, some poplars, clematis, maple, and many others still have their leaves. What's up with that?

Ask the experts. So I asked Dr. Rita Hummel, WSU Researcher at WSU Puyallup whether the failure to drop leaves might mean that the tree was not hardy. She didn't think so. It raised no red flags for her. She pointed to Oaks where the juvenile foliage retains it's leaves through winter. As the tree more fully matures, then they drop their leaves. It has nothing to do with hardiness. Dr. Linda Chalker-Scott was at the same meeting, a stroke of good timing. She too did not think that the leaves being retained was related to not being hardy. Of course time will tell but both faculty don't think leaves on the tree signifies any major damage as a result of delayed hardening off.

November Freeze. Yes, you are wondering what impact that sudden freeze had on your plants in the nursery and in landscapes. Remember that as we move from twig to root, the plant becomes more and more hardy and able to withstand the cold. A survival mechanism we share, as it is our extremities that freeze first, working back toward the center and concentrating it's anti-freeze energy to protect the core with more fat or more bark respectively.

So what can you tell customers? Wait and see. Damage will be worst at the tips, with the trunk (except the south side) being more cold hardy. Roots are less hardy but they are protected by the ground and those insulating layers of leaves. Roots in containers will be more at risk. Plants may leaf out in spring then shrivel and die. They may be later leafing out or may be of thinner foliage. Color may be off on some branches sensitive to bark spitting but green in others. Blossoms may be delayed. Let the tree tell you where it is alive in spring by leafing out. If you are impatient, try the snap test: bend twigs to see if they snap. Flexible bending is good, snapping not so much. If your customer is really impatient, cut a thin slice just under the bark to see if the cambium is green. That thin layer of cells is a good indicator of the health of the twig or branch.

Leaves may burn, some buds may abort, tissue will blacken or turn pale tan and bark may split especially on the southwest sides of tree trunks. When sun beats on tree bark, the sap begins to flow back into the cells. At dusk, temperatures plummeted, and the sharp drop occurred before the sap could move back between cells. Just like an overfilled balloon, the cells rupture. And bang!! The tissue dies. Wilted plants are likely to come back from the roots protected in the ground.

More detail on plant damage is found in Winter Injury of Landscape Plants in the PNW by Ray Maleike, Marianne Ophardt and Sharon J. Collman, (free printable copy) <http://cru.cahe.wsu.edu/CEPublications/eb1645/eb1645.html>