

## Avoiding Landscape Damage in Winter

**Your actions in the fall can support plants through a cold winter.** When winter weather turns abnormally frigid, there's not a lot someone can do except salvage what's left. Some winter damage can be minimized, and even prevented, by taking a few important steps in fall for cold-preparation. One of the most important, and widely overlooked, measures is keeping the soil damp *until* it freezes. Depending on the type of season, that can happen sometime between late October and early December.

Most landscapers know it's important to water plants in hot, dry weather, but many of them stop soon after Labor Day. That can be a problem with dry fall weather when plants and roots are still growing. Water demands of plants go down as growth slows and daylight diminishes, but it's still possible to stress, or even kill, plants from lack of water in the fall. This is especially important for new plants added in the past year or two, because they haven't fully rooted and are most dependent on consistent moisture near their original root ball.

Adequate fall soil moisture is especially important to broadleaf evergreens. Evergreens not only need soil moisture when they're still growing in fall, but unlike trees and shrubs that drop their leaves in fall, they keep losing moisture through their leaves all winter. Needled evergreens, such as spruce, fir and pine, also run into this issue but not quite as severely as evergreens with large leaves.

When the ground freezes in winter, evergreen roots can't replenish the moisture being lost through their leaves. If it gets cold and windy enough, plants begin to suffer from *windburn*, a condition in which the foliage first browns around the edges, and in bad enough cases, browns all over. In severe cases, the plant can drop leaves or graduate from winter-burn to dead. To prevent windburn, plant broadleaf evergreens, especially winter-hardy ones.

Don't be too quick to put away the hose for winter! Soak the ground every week or two throughout fall if the soil is dry, up until the ground finally freezes regularly. Just because the calendar says winter doesn't mean plants don't need water.

Another helpful winter-prevention strategy is making sure 2 to 3 inches of mulch cover the ground around your trees, shrubs and perennials. Wood chips, shredded hardwood, pine straw and bark mulch are all fine. Mulch helps keep moisture in the soil, keeps the soil warmer longer, and prevents freezing and thawing that can shove young plants partly out of the ground, exposing their roots to killing cold and wind.

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