

Protecting Your Trees From Common Landscape Operations

Common landscape practices often lead to poor performance of trees and shrubs. Mulching operations, mowing, string trimming, and fertilizing can lead to tree damage.

A manicured lawn is a beautiful frame for your trees, flower beds and other enhancements to your landscape such as decks, pavers, rock gardens or topiaries. While the grass may be the perfect height and the leaves have all been raked-up or blown away, it's important not to ignore the rest of your landscape. There are a few issues to watch out for when the dust settles.

A common misconception about trees and shrubs is that they can withstand damage better than other vegetation such as annuals, perennials, bulbs, and grasses. This is incorrect; trees and shrubs need just as much TLC as blooming plants or a lush green lawn. Damaged tree trunks and limbs will not heal properly, especially when bark is lost or torn. Trunk wounds and broken branches not removed in a timely manner can be entry points for a multitude of diseases and insects, depending on species, and do not heal as quickly as a proper pruning cut made on a branch. Unfortunately, most mowing and landscape operations coincide with insect and disease life cycles. Proper pruning cuts and appropriate clearance for work occurring under and around your trees can alleviate most problems.

To protect your trees and shrubs and help alleviate damage while mowing, simply add a proper layer of mulch. A layer of mulch three to four inches deep, six feet in diameter around your trees and shrubs keeps mowing operations away from the trunk and limbs. When mulching, do not 'volcano' the mulch around the tree trunk. Mulch volcanoes can lead to moisture build up around the trunk, leading to trunk rot. Mulch should be spread out evenly in the tree's drip line, with very little mulch placed against the tree trunk. The mulch layer will help distribute water evenly throughout the drip line, and help maintain proper soil pH for woody plants.

Additional problems can pop up due to mowing operations. Oftentimes in commercial settings, mowers discharge grass clippings away from paved surfaces. This generally leads to grass clipping build-up under trees and shrubs and can be a deterrent to water absorption, rendering the mulch less effective. As a homeowner, this situation is easily remedied by cultivating the grass clippings and soil under the trees or using a grass catcher. This becomes a much bigger task on commercial properties, and oftentimes the only solution is to require clipping collection or discharging away from tree rings.

The use of string trimmers in your landscape maintenance can be helpful because they are less invasive to a tree's growing space. However, the use of a string trimmer to remove suckers at the base of a tree can lead to trunk damage. String trimmers should not be used for this pruning task.

Using proper pruning techniques and equipment contribute to the appearance and health of your landscape. Using the proper fertilizer is equally important. Fertilizing trees and shrubs requires a different set of nutrients than grass and flowers. Grass and flower fertilizers often have a high percentage of nitrogen. If trees and

shrubs are exposed to the same rate of nitrogen, they will have a large growth spurt. This lowers the amount of energy the tree will put toward disease and insect defense, strong branch connections, and root growth. Oftentimes, turf and flower fertilizers will raise the pH of the soil, which is not beneficial for most woody plants. Having specific fertilizers for different areas of your yard will benefit all plants. Furthermore, understanding what plants can coincide together successfully will enhance and protect your landscape investment.

February 2011