

Springtime in the Ranch

Spring in Colorado can bring a myriad of scenarios: snow, ice, wind, rain, and warm weather. It's important to understand how these different climatic conditions can affect your trees and what you can do to protect them.

"Patience and a keen eye are requirements for successful springtime gardening efforts," according to Highlands Ranch Metro District Forestry Technician Jason Kruegel. "Allowing the proper weather patterns to settle in is important which in turn will pay good dividends in the long run." Kruegel continues to explain that there are different things you can do to help your landscape respond and thrive in the springtime.

No matter what the weather patterns are shaping up to be, mulching is beneficial year round. Providing a three to five inch layer of mulch under your tree's canopy insulates delicate feeder roots, improves soil structure and prevents erosion. If a solid layer of mulch is already present, cultivate it. Breaking up the soil allows air and nutrients to permeate it while encouraging microbial breakdown of the mulch. And remember when spreading the mulch to keep it off the trunk of the tree.

While mulching can aid in protecting delicate roots, trees prone to late frost damage have additional needs. Newly planted trees need protection from cold weather events occurring in late spring. April and May snowstorms often follow warm weather periods. The warm weather promotes bud swelling and potential fruit and flower production, and late spring cold snaps can often stunt the new growth that has begun. To prevent this from happening, cover young saplings with a clear plastic membrane that allows warm sunlight to penetrate, but keeps out the cold. Covering saplings can help sustain your tree's new growth.

Other measures which also help protect trees from a late frost are protective trunk wraps found at your local garden center, and situating your tree in a protected or sheltered area within your yard. When the trees have been established, generally two to three growing seasons, protection should no longer be necessary other than the occasional snow removal from branches to prevent snow loading.

Monitoring trees during spring requires a keen eye. Paying close attention to bud swell, bud break, and leaf development can give you insight into a tree's health. Oftentimes trees are planted in groups which allows for easy comparison of trees within the same species. Cross species comparison is also easy to do, but remember different trees have different growth characteristics. Paying attention to the growth characteristics of the trees in your yard can add predictability to your springtime routine by eliminating doubt and increasing your understanding of tree processes. Stunted bud swell, tip dieback, irregular leaf shapes and discoloration are signs of stress or problems.

Additional caution should be taken when planting new trees, or planting around established trees in the spring. Planting a tree too early regardless of the moisture content of your soil, can be harmful to your new tree. Late frosts and snow may pose a deadly threat to a tree which has yet to develop a strong root system. Waiting for a period of warm weather will aid in root development and bud break for newly planted trees. Refrain from using tillers, trenchers, shovels, or other large hand tools around the root zone of developing and mature trees. Hand trowels and air excavation tools can be used around trunks and root zones worry free.

Warm spring days and cold, frosty mornings are commonplace in Colorado in the spring. As a result, trees in the landscape need some extra TLC. By taking simple measures such as laying mulch, placing a trunk wrap around your tree, or having some patience before you plant that new tree, your landscape will benefit in the long run.

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