

Preventing Sun Scald on Trees

Helping Your Trees Survive Winter



The Condition

Sun scald is another form of injury that can result in cracks and splits. It occurs in the winter usually on the south or west side of the trunks and branches.

The damage takes place when the cells in the living tissue beneath the bark break dormancy on warm, sunny days and then rupture and die when night temperatures drop below freezing at night. The tree is injured when enough cells in a given area are killed. The following spring these dead areas will appear discolored and sunken. In time the bark killed by sun-scald will split and peel. These areas also provide entry points for insects and diseases.

Young thin bark trees are the most susceptible to sun scald injury. The following trees may be subject to sun scald if they are planted in open areas where no sun protection during the winter months exists: honey locust, linden, maples such as sugar and red, beech, flowering crabs and all fruit trees. Trees growing in wet compacted soils are also vulnerable to sun scald. Trees that are fertilized in spring and have a sudden burst of new growth in the summer have tissue that is easily damaged.

To reduce or eliminate sun scald injury, wrap the trunks of the susceptible trees each fall with tree wrap paper. Do this each year in late fall (October) until the trees mentioned above develop some “character” or roughness to the bark. It is very necessary to remove the wrap each April 15th so that the trunk is not damaged by being too wet. It can also become a hiding place for damaging insects. Another way to protect trees with thin bark is to place plants nearby that will shade the south side of the tree’s trunk during the winter months.

A vigorous healthy tree can survive a sun scald injury if it is able to grow inner bark on the edges of the split. A sharp, sterilized knife (dipped in a 10% bleach solution or 70% alcohol for several minutes) could be used to remove loose bark from the split, which will speed up the healing process. The resulting bare patch on the trunk should be left untreated. Tree wound paints and tars do not help in wound healing, and should NOT be applied. Encourage good tree vigor with late fall applications (late October) of tree fertilizer, and provide adequate water in hot dry weather. Ensure that the tree is well watered going into the time the ground freezes in the winter. Established trees (2-3 years in the ground) can be watered and fertilized at the same time with a root feeder that waters and feeds at the same time.



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