



CMG GardenNotes #653

Wrapping Trees For Winter

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Why Use Wrap

Tree wrap is used to protect young, thin-barked trees during the winter months. Wrapping trees helps protect against sunscald and frost cracks, both of which are temperature related. Not all trees need to be wrapped. Species such as linden, maple, ginkgo, crabapple and redbud will benefit from tree wrap. Trees with thick, corky bark, like bur oak, do not need to be wrapped.

Sunscald

Sunscald is also known as “southwest injury” since it tends to occur on the south or southwest side of the tree. During the winter, the south/southwest side of the tree is warmest, due to the location and angle of the sun during the winter months. Sunny warm winter days “wake up” cells in the cambium (the living tissue in the tree), causing them to move water and nutrients. As temperatures drop at night, the cells freeze and burst, causing bark splitting. Sunscald creates a jagged wound along the trunk that can take a long time to seal over and be an entry point for disease and insects.



Figure 1 Sunscald damage

Frost Cracks

Frost cracks are vertical cracks in the trunk or stems of trees. Warm winter days cause the cells to warm up and expand. As the sun sets, the outer bark temperature cools quickly, but the inside of the tree remains warmer, which results in splitting. Younger trees are most susceptible. Frost cracks are usually not as detrimental to tree health as sunscald.

The rules for using tree wrap are as follows:

1. Wrap trees at the end of November and removed in early spring (mid-April). Tree wrap should not be left on all year.
2. Use a light-colored crepe-paper type wrap; using plastic, dark colored materials or burlap can result in tree damage. Crepe-paper wrap has some elasticity to it and sheds water, keeping the trunk dry.
3. Start wrapping at the bottom of the tree, overlapping by 1/3 until you reach the first branch. Tape the wrap to prevent it from slipping at the top of the tree. Or consider stapling the wrap to itself around the first branch. Do not staple the wrap into the tree!

Once the bark of the tree has hardened and become furrowed, it is not necessary to wrap trees. Trees should only be wrapped for the first one to three years following planting. It cannot be emphasized enough that wrapping is only a seasonal treatment.

Using Latex Paint

Latex paint is often used in nurseries and orchards since it is a cheaper and less labor-intensive option to wrapping trees individually. Paint is not as aesthetically pleasing and will take time to wear off. Only use water-based latex paint and not oil-based, as it can damage trees. Apply the paint in late fall when temperatures are above 50 degrees F so it can dry quickly.

Watch this short video on tree wrapping:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_KOaHXETb4



Figure 2 Tree wrap

Author: Alison O'Connor, Colorado State University Extension. Photos courtesy Alison O'Connor.

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