

Helping Native Plants Through the Winter Drought

While we have had some helpful showers in the last few months, we are still continuing in a severe drought. Stream flows and lake levels are still at record lows as is the soil moisture. A frequently asked question is “What can we do to take care of our plants during the winter?” When I have asked experts about what they think the long-term consequences of this drought are likely to be, the answer I usually get is “I don’t know, I have never seen anything like this before.”

I think we are all trying to feel our way through this extreme situation as best we can. So I am going to offer some suggestions as to what to do to take care of your native trees and perennials, but be aware that these are just one man’s ideas of how to cope with something he has never seen before.

First, if you have a blackjack or Spanish oak, or box elder or any other tree that either lost its leaves or the leaves turned brown earlier this year, I would not assume it is dead. I would wait until next spring after all other trees have leafed out before declaring it dead, because it might come back in the spring. One thing for sure, if you think it is probably dead and you cut it down, you will certainly be right. Even if the main trunk is dead, its roots might be alive to produce root sprouts in the spring.

Do you need to water trees in the winter? My concern is that the soil is so dry that roots might die if we don’t get periodic rains of three-quarters of an inch or more, so to be safe I would water trees every three or four weeks, wet enough to be able to push a screwdriver into the soil about six inches. Obviously, deciduous trees do not use water for photosynthesis once the leaves are gone, but the roots and the cambium tissue need to stay moist. Even live oaks are not undergoing much activity in the cooler weather and shorter days, but they still need some moisture.

One consequence of this drought is that there is a lot more bare ground in places than there usually is. Bare ground is subject to greater temperature swings than ground under vegetation, and bare ground subject to periodic showers tends to become clogged at the surface and thus less permeable, so less of the water it does receive soaks in. Mother Nature has a solution for that in the winter, it is called leaving dead leaves on the ground. A layer of dead leaves under trees not only insulates the ground but holds moisture and maintains the soil porosity, all of which is beneficial for the trees, and as the leaves decay the nutrients contained in them are returned to the soil.

I know that people feel they need to rake leaves off of lawns, and certainly large amounts of large leaves on a lawn can cause mold and other problems. Small leaves such as from cedar elms are not much of a problem, and larger leaves can be chopped up by running a lawn mower (set very high) over them. Leaving a small amount of cut up leaves on the lawn will recapture the nutrients in them.

It is best to delay any pruning of shrubs or cutting back of perennials until late winter/early spring (late February) for two reasons. First, if some shrubs are pruned too soon and we have a warm spell, the plant may try to put up new shoots, which will probably be killed by a subsequent freeze and the plant will have wasted energy.

Second, unpruned shrubs may have seeds or berries that can be used by the birds. Leaving seed heads on flowers throughout the winter gives birds a chance to find the seeds when they really need them.

My philosophy of growing native trees, shrubs, grasses and wildflowers is very simple. First, notice what Mother Nature does when we are not around, because all of these native plants evolved to live here and have survived thousands of years without us. Second, think about how we can best mimic the conditions these plants are used to growing in. And third, try to mimic Mother Nature.

Until next time...

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