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Help California Transplants Adapt

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GARDEN NOTES

HELP CALIFORNIA TRANSPLANTS ADAPT

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Imagine yourself as a plant sitting in a nursery in California. You are enjoying the sunshine, sipping a nitrogen daiquiri through your drip irrigation system and thinking life is great. Then, without warning, a truck comes and hauls you off to Northern Utah.

A well-intended homeowner buys you, and sets you in the middle of a yard with no protection. The summer is somewhat bearable, but then winter hits. You ask yourself, "What did I do to deserve this?" Just like human California transplants, it takes plants awhile to adjust to our winters.

Many plants at Utah nurseries are shipped in from the West Coast, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Others have spent much of their lives elsewhere in warm greenhouses. Once in the landscape, these plants must acclimate themselves in order to survive our freezing winter months.

"Most cold-tolerant plants grown here become winter hardy through gradual exposure to cooling temperatures. A sudden drop in the temperature can damage them. Even very hardy plants can be damaged or killed by extreme changes in temperatures that occur over a period as short as a day or two," Goodspeed warns.

Another fairly common situation that damages plants in Utah is a late winter thaw followed by a sudden return to winter, he says.

"The plants begin to awaken just in time to get nailed before they have a chance to acclimate once again to the freezing temperatures."

Fortunately, there are a few things you can do to prepare plants for winter.

"Freezing weather damages plants by creating a drought condition," Goodspeed explains. "As the water in the soil freezes, it becomes unavailable to the plant. On a windy or sunny day, the branches may still be transpiring and using water. The plant is unable to replace this lost water and literally burns. Hence the term 'winter burn'."

He says protecting susceptible trees takes time and effort. The most important thing is to provide them with a deep watering in the fall. This deep water is less likely to freeze and is normally more available to the plants.

“Small evergreens and other sensitive plants can be wrapped with burlap to protect them from the drying winds,” Goodspeed says. “Other options include erecting a burlap or strong fabric wind screen, applying a deep mulch around the plants or spraying them with an anti-desiccant. These anti-desiccant sprays act like a coat on the needles of the plants and reduce the transpiration rate. They are often used on Christmas trees to keep them fresh longer.”

Voles and rodents can be another problem during cold, snowy winters.

Goodspeed says they may girdle trees as they eat the bark around the base of the trunk. Living next to a field or vacant lot increases the risk of vole damage.

He suggests wrapping tree trunks for protection or use fencing material around them to keep rodents out. Another option is placing bait and rodent poison in a small diameter PVC pipe around the trees in an orchard. Putting the poison in the pipe prevents other pets and animals from gaining access to it, but lures rodents to the poison. Hopefully, they eat the poison before destroying the trees.

Fortunately, most plants, like most residents, adapt after a couple years in our environment, Goodspeed says.

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