Have you been hurting or killing your trees?

Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist, is to trees what Dr. Doolittle is to animals, and the trees tell him that there are a lot of insensitive gardeners out there.

"I've gotten several reports from the trees, and they are not happy at all," he says. "I'm just trying to find out if you are the one they are accusing as they point out culprits with their spindly twigs."  

"My first question concerns your watering habits. Are you trying to drown your trees? A few of them have suggested that there's so much water you could forget the soil and just put them in a bathtub. They testify that someone is watering them almost every day, literally cutting off their oxygen supply.

"I have it on good authority that most trees like infrequent long, deep drinks, not continual little sips," Goodspeed says.

Consider the method Mother Nature uses when she waters, he suggests. Many of your trees have tried to tell you they are over-watered by turning their leaves yellow, wilting, even putting up a stink in the soil. Give those trees a long drink every week or two. Make sure the water is penetrating a minimum of 12 to 18 inches. It's OK to keep watering your lawn, but allow more days between watering. "Next, are you physically harming your trees with a lawn mower or trimmer?" Goodspeed asks. "The number of wounded, scarred and broken tree trunks everywhere is incriminating evidence. Must I remind you again to keep all sharp equipment away from the base of trees? They don't like being cut, banged or whipped. This blight does more to stunt growth and encourage infections than any other abuse inflicted on our poor trees."

Also keep all grass, plants and machine-bearing teenagers away from tree trunks, he says. If the tree is planted in the lawn, remove the grass from around the base and replace it with a mulch. Not only does grass around the base promote mechanical damage, but it also keeps the base moist, which can foster rot and other problems.

"OK now, let's talk about space," Goodspeed says. "Most trees need adequate root and crown space to grow and thrive. I've heard rumors that some of your trees are feeling a little claustrophobic. Most large tree roots need room to grow and stretch, so avoid planting them next to the house, garage or in a tight little planter.

"Consider the height and width of a tree before deciding where to plant it. Be sure there is sufficient space for it to grow on the top and underneath the soil. A tree encircled by a driveway and sidewalk has limited soil, and may struggle to obtain enough water, nutrients and support."

Speaking of room, are you guilty of lopping off the top of your trees when they get too tall?
"Never top a tree! Be certain you know what you are doing before taking some loppers, pruners, or even worse - a chain saw into a tree," he cautions. "Remember, cutting a tree does not keep it from growing. Poor pruning damages trees and can lead to decay and eventual death. If a branch or limb needs to be removed, cut it back to another side branch or the main trunk. If you are not sure what you are doing, ask a professional, a certified arborist or the tree itself."

"Just one more question before I let you slink back to your landscape and apologize to your trees," Goodspeed says. "Are you intentionally poisoning your trees? Keep in mind that most chemicals can weaken or damage trees, especially broadleaf weed killers. Most trees are broadleaf plants and a spray like 2,4-D, Triminic or some others can indeed damage trees if mis-used."

For more information, contact your local USU County Extension office.
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