

Marks Remarks by Mark Rowen Lincoln County Educator 1-28-10

Trees, particularly evergreens, are bending and breaking under the heavy ice loading, but the South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service forestry specialist has suggestions for treating these problems.

Extension Forestry Specialist John Ball said that when young trees bend under the weight of ice, people often think the best reaction is to remove the ice to reduce the weight.

Dr. Ball said “Do not do this because knocking the ice free can result in branch breakage and further damage to the tree, generally it is best to allow the ice to melt and the tree to slowly resume its natural shape. Many times these trees will recover their natural shape and resume normal growth by spring.”

Ball said young trees such as birches and cottonwoods have very flexible stems and can easily recover from the bending. If the young tree appears so bent that it may break, tree owners should then provide temporary support by use of wooden props.

“Gently pull up the stem or branch to be supported and place the board beneath it, I usually recommend cutting the top of the prop into a ‘V’ or ‘U’ shape to hold the trunk or branch. Remember, you are not trying to restore the tree to its pre-ice position, you’re just providing a little support to keep it from bending farther,” said Ball.

The bending of the branches and trunk is a stress, even when the tree does return to its natural shape. The bending results in internal damage and that often these same trees are attacked the following growing season by opportunistic insects, such as borers, that are able to exploit the weakened trees.

“Young ash, birch, and cottonwoods that experience severe twisting during ice storms may be protected by treating the trees for borers this spring,” said Ball. “When spring comes, using pesticides that are either sprayed on the bark to kill the adult insects that are laying eggs or injected into the tree to kill the larvae after they hatch may be a valuable means of reducing the potential threat of infestation.”

Ball said when branches do break, tree owners should prune the branch cleanly back to where it attaches to a larger branch or the trunk.

“The pruning cut should follow the collar, which is the swollen area where the branch attaches to the rest of the tree,” said Ball. “The cut should begin just outside of the branch bark ridge – the ridge of bark that forms where the branch and trunk meet – and proceed down at about an opposite, but similar, angle to the ridge.”

There is no need to paint these cuts or apply any other type of wound dressing. While the pruning should be completed as soon as possible, Ball said there is little additional risk to the tree by waiting for a few days until it is safer to work in these ice-coated trees.

Dr. Ball said “Any work that involves pruning off the ground should be left to professional arborists. These individuals have the training and equipment to work safely at heights.”

With the numerous trees that have forked stems that are now split to the ground, Ball again suggests consulting with a professional.

“Trees may survive with some sort of support, but eventually the hardware will girdle the expanding trunks and either the top of the tree above the wrap will die or snap off,” Ball said. “Usually if a tree is split open, it is best to remove the tree. Tree support systems can help, but the decision to use these systems, and their installation, should only be done by a qualified arborist.”

For more information about this or other topics, call your Lincoln County Extension office at 764-2756.