

Gardening in the Zone[©]

with Iowa Gardening Magazine's Liz Gilman



Paula Flynn talks about fall needle drop.

Fall Needle Drop

10/10/05

They may be called evergreens, but not all their needles are ever green. This week I interviewed Paula Flynn, a plant pathologist at Iowa State University, about what we should do if we notice brown needles on our evergreens.

Flynn explained that if your evergreens are turning brown right now in the fall, there's probably nothing you should do. Conifers which include pine, fir and spruce eventually lose their oldest foliage. Yellow or yellow-orange needles that fall very easily when touched signal the beginning of natural needle loss. Many people assume that the trees are sick or dying but these plants are simply losing some of their older needles and this is completely natural. It's their life cycle.

Two trees that do lose all their needles in the fall are the bald cypress and the larch. They'll come back again in the spring though so don't write them off as dead. Otherwise, the degree of needle loss will vary from tree to tree and year to year. Needle drop is especially noticeable after a stressful summer or fall. The important thing to notice is if the needles are shedding from nearest the trunk to outer branches. If this is the case, it's a natural phenomenon and again you don't need to do anything.

Flynn does point out some warning signs that could signal problems with your evergreens. If the current season's growth becomes brown or shows up all over the plant rather than close to the trunk, then you may have a problem. Also, if your needles brown at other times of the year, that may be a sign of disease or insect damage. If you see red-brown or orange cast on evergreens in the early spring, it's probably winter injury. This may be caused by an early fall frost or a dry and mild winter and the discolored needles are usually more on the south and west sides of the tree. An overall grayish, yellowish green or white appearance of evergreens in the summer may indicate the presence of spider mites and needles could drop prematurely because of their feeding.

According to Flynn, the key for this time of year is to see if the brown needles on your conifers are close to the trunk. If they are and the needles are dropping, then it's completely normal for autumn. Which I guess goes to show you that in the fall, evergreens are only sometimes ever green.

To watch Gardening in the Zone or for more gardening information exclusively for our USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 4 and 5, please log on to www.iowagardeningmagazine.com or www.extension.iastate.edu. Our tips are always something you can do in your own backyard.

IOWA
gardening
magazine

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
University Extension
Helping you become your best.