

News Column for Use Week of 9/30/19
Kelsey Hatesohl, Extension Agent: Horticulture
River Valley Extension District
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Stress to Trees and Shrubs is Cumulative

Trees and shrubs can be affected by stresses that happened up to several years in the past. Stress is cumulative. Recent stresses include winter damage, as well as the extremely dry winter of 2017-2018 which often resulted in damaged root systems. This damaged root system may have been further weakened due to too much rain this spring. Excess water harmed root systems, because the saturated soils reduced the amount of oxygen in the soils. Roots need oxygen as much as they need water. Though the roots were able to keep up with moisture demands during the cooler spring weather. The roots may not have been able to keep up when the weather turned hot and dry, causing trees and shrubs to suddenly collapse and die or slough off branches they can no longer support. Lilacs are a species that are collapsing throughout area due to the roots being stressed.

This does not mean all of our plants are doomed. As a matter of fact, plants that have survived thus far into the growing season will likely make it. Also, some plants are just better adapted to our tough Kansas conditions and have suffered little to no harm. However, it is a good idea to check the overall health of your trees. So, how do you check the health of your tree?

One of the most important clues in determining the health of your trees is the amount of new growth the tree has produced. A healthy tree should have a minimum of 4 to 6 inches of new growth each year and usually much more. Check branches with the tips in the open and not shaded by the tree itself. Anything less than 4 inches on the majority of the branches suggests the tree is under a great deal of stress.

So, how do you tell where the new growth stops? Look for a color change in the stem. New growth is often greener than the previous year's growth. There is also often an area of what looks like compressed growth where growth transitions from one year to the next.

By checking the new growth on the tree, it tells you whether a tree is under stress or not. It doesn't tell you what is causing or has caused poor growth. This year, the most common cause by far is environmental stress caused by the excess rain this spring. So, what do we do for trees under stress? Water. When we hit dry periods be sure to give your stressed plants water. If you have any questions please contact Kelsey Hatesohl at the Washington Extension Office at 785-325-2121 or at khatesohl@ksu.edu.