



What is wrong with these trees?



These trees are damaged by what is called Southwest Injury or Sunscald. It is a wintertime injury to tree trunks, caused by the sun's warmth and freezing temperatures. Young, thin-barked trees including the maples, redbuds, willows, crabapples, ashes, honey locusts and fruit trees are most at risk.

Trees that are under stress due to environmental factors, herbicide injury, and or insect and disease are also susceptible to damage.

How it happens is when we have a warm, sunny day in January and the sun is at a low-angle, it warms the south and southwest sides of the trunk causing cold-hardy bark cells to warm and expand. Then, the sun sets and the temperature drops below freezing and the bark cells are killed, causing the bark to split. Water flow from the roots to the top of the tree can be affected by the split and the top of the tree may also suffer from die-back. Trees planted on the east or north of buildings are less likely to be affected.

It is possible to prevent Sunscald on young trees for the first two or three winters by placing a board on the southwest side of the trunk or by using a tree wrap product purchased at local nurseries. Start at the bottom of the trunk and overlap by one third on each pass to allow water to run off the wrap. Wrap up to just above the second branch and secure with stretchable tape. Wrapping in November and removing the wrap in April will prevent Sunscald in the colder months and insects or disease being harbored under the wrap when the weather warms.

Sunscald is not a summer problem because leaves protect the tree trunk from sun, the sun is higher in the sky and freezing temperatures are not likely.