KPOV – *The Point*

Gardening: Get Good At It

“Plant Clinic”

August 28, 2018

It’s hard to believe that it’s the end of August, summer is almost over and fall will soon be here. In the August Plant Clinic, we get calls about pine trees looking pretty bad. People notice their trees have needles near the trunk that are turning yellow with some are dropping off. They call and ask the Master Gardeners if their trees are infested and if they’re dying.

Actually, this is a natural thing all conifers do, probably to lessen the stress of going through winter. It’s just more visible in pines because they don’t hold on to as many year’s foliage as other conifers do. White pines keep only 1-2 year’s needles so this needle drop is more noticeable than even on Ponderosa, Austrian and Scotch pines which can hold up to 3 years needles. In spruce and fir, it is even less visible.

How do you know which kind of conifer you have? Check the needles. Pines have long needles that always grow in clusters from a single point on a branch, are soft and have 2, 3 or 5 in a bunch. Spruces have short and rigid needles that don’t grow in a cluster. Spruce needles grow from a “peg” and many are square. Fir trees grow soft, flat needles that look like they’re attached by suction cups to the branch. If your tree has berries but not cones, it may be an evergreen yew tree.

Yellowing needles may also be more noticeable on trees that are under drought stress due to inadequate water or poor root health. Before the ground freezes, deep water your trees at least 18” in the fall and then again in the spring. Run a soaker hose at the drip-line for 12-24 hours or fill a shallow ditch around the tree at the drip-line several times until the water penetrates deeply. This will help carry the tree through our often dry and windy winters. If you see that needle tips, new needle growth or random patches of needles are turning brown, your trees may have a problem and need to be diagnosed.

In August, Plant Clinic also gets a lot of calls about caterpillars in landscape trees. Many of the webs are made by Fall Webworm. As summer is ending, the adult moths have emerged and are laying eggs. After about a week, they hatch into larva or caterpillars and spend the next 6 weeks feeding in deciduous trees. They will feed in more than species of 100 trees and shrubs nationwide but in Central Oregon we commonly see them in cottonwood and aspen, fruit trees, maple and willow. After feeding, the larvae crawl under loose bark or to the ground to form a cocoon or pupate in leaf litter or the soil until the next year when they emerge in early to mid-summer as an adult.

Some people mistake Fall Webworm for Tent Caterpillar but this Webworm appears in the fall and encloses its food and itself in a web which is much larger than Tent Caterpillar webs which appear in the Spring.

Since Fall Webworm is more of a nuisance pest which generally doesn’t cause major tree damage, we recommend pruning reachable branches, bag and destroy them or let natural predators take care of as many webworms as possible. Limiting use of pesticides will be beneficial to birds, bats and insects that rely on these worms for a late season food source. If there is a need to spray for these, Bt is a great choice. As a last resort, and a generally more toxic one, there are chemicals registered for these insects.

For more information about today’s topics or any other garden questions you may have, call the Master Gardeners’ Plant Clinic at 541-548-6088 or visit our website: gocomga.com and click on the KPOV tab on the orange bar.

This has been “Gardening: Get Good at It” on KPOV’s The Point.

Resources:

Identifying Conifers <https://gardenerspath.com/plants/landscape-trees/identifying-conifers/>

Pine Needle Drop <http://www.ppdl.purdue.edu/PPDL/expert/Needle_Drop.html>

<http://learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/A2614.pdf>

Fall Webworm <http://oregonstate.edu/dept/nurspest/fall_webworm.htm>

<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/fall-webworm-tents-dont-really-hurt-trees>