

Is My Tree Dying?

The question, “Is my tree dying?” is one that I receive often here at the Extension Office in Jasper. As you can probably imagine, it isn’t all that hard to determine if a tree is dead or not. Even more so during the Spring and Summer seasons which should be prime-time for carbohydrate (food) production in trees. If there are no leaves on your tree during these times of the year, it’s more likely than not, your tree has seen it’s last days. Again, it’s not hard to determine tree mortality, but what is a bit more challenging is to catch it before it “sees the light” and answer the question, “Why is it dying?”. A common and sometimes accurate thought towards answering this question might be, “It needs to be watered.” It’s true, trees do need lots of water, especially in the summer months when temperatures are high and moisture is typically lacking. A good rule of thumb for watering trees in summer months is approximately 10 gal./week for every 10” of trunk diameter which is to be distributed around the dripline of the tree (a ruler and 5-gallon bucket work well for application). Another thought might be, “It needs to be fertilized” which could or could not be true. How do you know? Take a soil sample. Simply put, a soil sample is used to determine the what soil amendments are needed for trees and other plants in addition to what is already available in the soil they are planted. Your tree may need fertilizer and other amendments added to the soil, or it may not. What you can be certain of is a soil sample can answer that question, save you time, money, frustration, and... I have all the tools and information to do it here at my office.

Now, while both the thoughts above are accurate and may shed light on or even alleviate your concern, there are many other factors that may cause tree decline or death. The first of which is site quality. Does the soil drain slow or fast? Slow drainage could be beneficial during periods of drought, but detrimental if moisture is in excess (the opposite would apply for fast draining soils). Is the soil thin or compacted? If so, root’s nutrient and moisture absorption abilities will be limited.

The second factor that may cause tree decline or death is competition from adjacent vegetation. Let me use an analogy involving a family dinner to explain. Mom (nature) only makes enough food (essential nutrients) for four family members (trees), but both the son and daughter have a friend that unexpectedly stays for dinner (add two trees). Now what was a suitable amount of “essential nutrients” for four “trees” is an inadequate amount of “essential nutrients for six “trees”.

The third and final factor is changes in habitat. Whether it be lighting or wind damage or new construction, a tree’s habitat can be negatively altered. A residential call a few years back comes to mind where there was a beautiful new driveway put in a few years prior to my visit. In the right-angled corner made by the two-lane road and the driveway stood a magnificent and very large tree (I can’t recall the species, perhaps oak). It had put on leaves during the spring of the year, but lost over half of them shortly after. At the time of my visit in the late summer, the tree had lost even more leaves and would definitely not be pictured on the cover of “Tree Fitness” (if there was such a magazine). After scouting for pest pressure, I concluded that the homeowner, unintentionally and with help from the road, had covered over half of the tree’s root zone with concrete. As you can imagine, this cut moisture and nutrient absorption in half and, over time, had killed the tree.

Questions? Comments? Give me a call, send an e-mail, or stop by.

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