

Sounding the Alarm: Water Your Landscaping Now!

By Susan M. Thornton

Most of Colorado has had an extraordinarily dry winter, and the shrubs, trees, and lawns that grace special districts across the state are likely to be “very stressed” and “brittle-dry.” It’s a “dire situation that may force special districts into large expenses if they have to replace mature landscaping.”

That’s the pronouncement of Jason Holley with Terracare Associates, LLC, and Josh Cyboron of Emerald Isle Landscaping.

Both landscape care experts warn that even if the state gets snow in March, April, and May, it may be too late to make up for the earlier drought. Metro Denver usually gets an average of 53 inches of snow each winter, Holley points out. But three months into the winter of 2018, the Denver area has had only about five inches of snow.

With the large amount of money many special districts have invested in landscaping, Holley says, “winter watering is a very cheap insurance policy.”

Think High Desert

Holley points out that the Denver metro area and eastern Colorado are high deserts. “People forget about that,” he says, “because they see so much Kentucky Bluegrass around.”

But if people look at natural areas, he notes, they will see grasses that are drought-tolerant, unlike the imported varieties of grasses, shrubs, flowers, and trees that now beautify urban areas.

Two Years to See Tree Damage

Two years from now, people may be looking at dying trees across the metro area and wondering why, Holley states. “It will all be from the lack of winter watering,” he says. “Trees don’t just die right away. It takes time, maybe a couple of years.”

Newly planted trees and shrubs are especially at risk. They don’t have established root systems for up to two years, Holley says, so they can’t reach out for water to sustain themselves well.

In fact, he points out that the mortality rate for newly planted trees in Colorado is 19 percent. Most of this, he says, is due to lack of water and nutrient stress, which can be mitigated by winter watering and deep root feeding.

Some Trees More Vulnerable

Pines and spruce trees, which store water in their needles, are more weakened by lack of water than trees that drop their leaves, according to Holley.

Cyboron agrees, pointing out that the metro area saw a lot of dying pine trees a few years ago, when the winter was not nearly as dry as this winter has been. “Even when trees and shrubs are dormant, they need water,” he says.

Other trees and shrubs at risk from dry winters are shallow-rooted species such as lindens, birches, and Norway and silver maples. It’s essential, Holley says, to water them when the leaves start to fall to send them into winter with adequate moisture in the soil.

He also notes that trees growing in areas surrounded by turf are used to regular watering in the summer. They begin to stress a little at the beginning of the winter when lawn watering stops, he says. But by March, with the significant lack of moisture this year in Colorado, they are “extremely stressed-out.”

Turf is Also Vulnerable

Cyboron notes that this winter’s dryness may also result in significant areas of “winter-killed” turf.

He notes that turf that is planted on hill-sides or large slopes is most at-risk for winter die-off because water is more likely to run off of those areas before it can percolate down to

the roots of the grass. Areas with high sun exposure, typically facing south, are also at risk.

The damage to turf has probably been done by now if people haven’t been watering, he says.

Other Tasks for March

In addition to watering, March is a good time to prune trees and shrubs, which is best done before plants start “budding,” Holley says. Although, he warns that if this year’s winter continues to be so warm, plants may bud early.

March is also a good time to assess winter damage and prune any broken tree limbs or branches. A clean cut instead of a ragged break helps trees resist diseases.

Cyboron observes that spring is also the ideal time to install highly-efficient smart watering technology. “Water is a very scarce resource in Colorado,” he points out, and new technologies can save significantly on water use. He urges special districts to take time in the spring to check out irrigation systems and make sure they are in proper working order.

Save Some Money!

March is also a good time to get small projects done, such as removing plants, while saving on costs.

Holley points out that landscapers typically are less busy in early spring, so they can spend more time consulting with clients and can offer discounted rates on projects. 🌱



How to Winter-Water Trees

The Colorado State Forestry Service has the following recommendations for the winter watering of trees:

- » Water when two weeks have passed without lasting snow cover. Overly dry trees are susceptible to root and branch die-back, and subsequent insect and disease problems.
- » Water when temperatures are warm (above 40 degrees Fahrenheit).
- » Water a wide area; soak the full area under the span of the tree’s branches.
- » Water slowly, applying 10 gallons of water per inch of tree diameter.