

Trees Need Your Care by Catherine Tunis

Trees aren't just for aesthetics. Mature, healthy trees can add thousands of dollars to your property value and also make our neighborhood much cooler and more comfortable in summer, thus saving on your air conditioning bills.¹

Some of our trees, especially oaks, have been under a great deal of stress in recent years. Mild winters have allowed population explosions in leaf-eating insects, especially the eastern tent caterpillar, forest tent caterpillar, inch worms, and gypsy moths. These insects have damaged leaves and even defoliated many of our largest oaks in Spring. Many trees were able to leaf out again once the insects have gone but then were under further stress by the record droughts of the past two summers. Many of the affected trees have thin crowns and dead branches. Some have died.

I hope each of you will take the time to examine your trees and give them the care they need to make it through these tough years. Here are some steps you can take to help care for your trees.

1. If we have any dry periods, deep water your trees. Lawns can go dormant during dry times but trees may need help. When water-stressed, some tree leaves may droop, while oak leaves will probably not show any visual symptoms.

Infrequent, deep soakings of water are preferable to frequent, shallow watering. Apply one to two inches of water every seven to ten days over the entire root zone of the tree. This will encourage deeper root growth and a more drought tolerant tree. Frequent, shallow watering often leads to surface rooting and, in some instances, soil compaction.

2. Fertilize your trees. Fertilizing a tree can increase growth, reduce susceptibility to certain insects and diseases, and can increase plant vigor. This can be started now and into fall when they lose their leaves. It is important to use a slow-release fertilizer and place it so that it will not be washed into storm sewers when it rains. Do not use a "weed and feed" type of fertilizer near trees. Different trees will require different essential elements to function and grow. It is best to have a tree professional evaluate your tree and soil to determine the type and amount of fertilizer that should be used.
3. Watch your trees carefully NOW for any signs of insects. Many leaf-eating insects hatch out as soon as the trees start to leaf out. Light infestations can be controlled by placing burlap or other cloth on the trunks to provide a shady spot for insects to rest and then picking them off each day and placing them in soapy water to drown. If you have a heavy infestation, consider hiring a reputable tree company to spray them with a low

¹The Takoma Park Committee on the Environment has been monitoring weather conditions here in a typical Takoma Park backyard and at the Police Substation in Langley Park. Temperatures are typically 10 to 15 degrees cooler in our backyard on a sunny summer afternoon.

toxicity, non-persistent pesticide.²

4. Cut ivy and other vines off trees. Vines add weight to tree trunks and branches that they were not designed to carry, can block the sunlight and thus kill a tree, and provide a perfect habitat for harboring insects that damage trees. Vines also compete for soil moisture, preventing water from reaching the deep absorbing roots. When removing ivy from the trunk of the tree, it is important not to damage the bark.

5. Mulch your tree's root zone. Apply a two to four inch layer of mulch around the entire root zone of the tree or as much of the root zone as possible and keep the mulch about three inches away from the base of the tree. Mulch retains soil moisture, provides valuable nutrients to the root zone, minimizes weeds, and prevents mechanical injuries from weed eaters and lawn mowers. Don't "volcano" the mulch up the tree, apply more than four inches, nor pile mulch around the base of the trunk.

6. Scrape off insect egg masses next Fall. Tent caterpillar egg masses look like a small, dark charcoal-colored cylinder wrapped around twigs. Gypsy moth egg masses look like hairy golden blobs about 1 to 1.5 inches in size. They will be attached to tree bark, buildings and other objects. It is important to scrape off egg masses before March, 2003 and put them down the disposal or toilet. Notify the City of Takoma Park (301-585-8333, ext. 312) or, more importantly, the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) (410-841-5922) if you find gypsy moth egg masses. The MDA performs egg counts for gypsy moths every fall, therefore, it is very important to notify the MDA when egg masses are located and especially when they are removed.

I hope you'll take a little time to help your trees grow stronger. They add so much value to our neighborhood.

² Takoma Park law requires treatment of trees that are infested with insects or diseases, especially when they can affect other trees.