University of Nevada Cooperative Extension

Evergreen stress & hope

Once fall arrives, the barrage of advertisements for shopping adventures begins. Traditional mail is full of catalogs, our email boxes are stuffed with electronic coupons we may or may not use, and advertisements on TV are even more plentiful and louder. Stores have had holiday decorations up for at least a month. Of course, all is not pure commercialism; this is also the time for evergreen trees to come to prominence.

For most of the year, pines and junipers are simply the anonymous trees on the mountain. As leaves drop from deciduous trees, however, the deep green of conifers becomes particularly welcome. This is probably one reason that Christmas trees are almost invariably evergreen conifers.

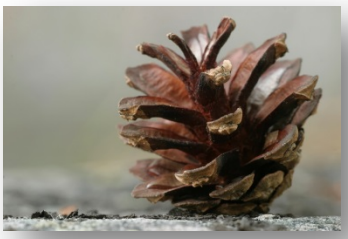
When these plants are at their most visible, unfortunately, any problems they have been experiencing show up dramatically.

Italian Cypress

Italian cypress can lose its stately column shape when branches have been bent down and out by nesting birds. An infestation of spider mites transmogrifies the deep green foliage into a grayish green – notably unhealthy.

Some problems will be less obvious. Indeed, there are times when a problem can be confused with a natural, healthy event. This phenomenon is not limited to evergreens, certainly. Sunscald has been mistaken for variegation, for instance. A heavy fruit load on a very young tree might seem like a good thing, but it can weaken the tree and limit its production the following year, or years.

Since conifers become so prominent around this time, unfortunately, any effects of neglect during the previous year, or years, are on display. One way that pines, and other members of its clan, demonstrate their suffering, is by producing a bumper crop of cones.



Pines and their relations are gymnosperms – they do not create flowers or fruits. Instead, their seeds develop within a protective the woody structure we know as a cone. Actually, not all cones are woody. They can have any number of forms, large and small, brown, green or other colors. Some do not look at all like a traditional cone. The juniper “berry” is, in fact, a cone with its scales fused.

When a coniferous tree has undergone a period of stress, it can indicate its problems by the dried out needles, the leaves that drop all

over. A bare branch is the result. A more surprising phenomenon is the generation of a copious number of cones. This does make sense from an evolutionary perspective. Each seed-bearing plant holds the genetic information essential to the continuation of its species, and has the genetic mandate to “go forth and multiply”.

A pine with many cones on sparsely covered branches is not healthy, although some people have thought otherwise. This can be a case of the plant trying to keep the species alive, when it “thinks” that it individually will not survive. The production of all these cones can take much of the resources it has left. Despite this, if the tree is given ample water, soil amended with compost, and followed by application of dilute fertilizer, even a weakened tree may come back.

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