

# THE PURDUE LANDSCAPE REPORT

## Help Your Trees Transition into Autumn

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It's finally October, and we should be enjoying lovely fall temps and colors. While some of the trees are changing, it's not necessarily due to the change in seasons. As I write this, the temperature is 84 F (29 C). I look out my window and see mostly green leaves with some colors from the short cold snap we had and some from heat and drought stress. Whether you are worried about the trees in your yard and community or not, there are some simple tasks that we can do to assist them as we await the cooler temperatures of Autumn.

### Mulching

One simple task to better prepare your trees for winter is to add a new layer of mulch, which benefits your trees in multiple ways. Adding a 2-3 inch thick layer of mulch will better maintain moisture levels and buffer extreme temperature changes in the soil and will add some organic matter too. Mulching to the drip line will benefit the tree the most, but in the case of larger trees it's not always feasible. Try for at least a 3-foot radius from the trunk and make sure to leave a 2 inch or so gap between the trunk and the mulch. Remember, no volcano mulching.



A 3 foot radius mulch ring around a medium sized tree

### Fertilizing

That mulch you just added will add some organic material to your soil as it slowly breaks down, but an autumn fertilization can benefit your trees too. Unlike trees in the forest that have a natural supply of nutrients from fallen leaves and twigs, trees around our homes are usually deprived as we rake and clean up our yards. Adding a slow-release fertilizer in the fall helps provide a nutrient boost over the winter, can promote root growth, and better prepare your tree for Spring.

### Watering

Water is still an essential part of your tree care plan, but as temperatures drop and trees begin to head into dormancy they don't need as much water as is required in the hot summer months. If you have irrigation systems in your yard start to drop the frequency of watering. You can water up until the first freeze, but make sure soils are just a little damp and not soaked. Evergreens in particular will benefit from slow deep watering 1-2 times a week until the soil freezes. Winter winds and temperatures can desiccate the needles without an adequate supply of water.

### Pruning

Now is a good time to prune out any dead, damaged, or diseased limbs in your trees. If you have access to hand saws and pole saws or pruners, you can remove smaller branches or those closer to the ground. Make sure you are making proper pruning cuts though, and if there are large limbs, those at heights, or you are just unsure of how to make a good cut enlist the help of a professional arborist.

### Trunk damage

Sunscauld or southwest damage occurs on young and/or thin barked trees in the winter. Wounds can occur between the south to southwest facing part of the trunk on sunny days in the winter as temperatures rise and suddenly drop. Over time these wounds can become quite large. Trees can also incur damage from deer during the rut. Bucks will scrape trees with their antlers, scraping off the bark and damaging the cambium. Both of these injuries can be reduced on younger trees by installing tree guards in the

fall. Tree guards are plastic barriers you place around the main stem of the tree. I recommend using white corrugated drainage pipe that can be found at most home centers. You can make a cut lengthwise along the pipe for easy installation and make sure it has a large enough diameter to leave a space between it and the tree. Just remember to remove it come Spring.



Use of white tree guards can protect the trunk from temperature changes that

cause damage. Joseph OBrien, USDA  
Forest Service, Bugwood.org

## Inspections

Visual inspections can be done year-round, but this time of the year it might be easier to see changes in your tree as leaves are falling and the canopy becomes more visible. From the ground up to the canopy, some of the things you're looking for include fungal growth around the base of the tree, any sort of damage on the main stem or branches, premature leaf drop or color change, and branches that are dead, cracked, diseased, or seem weak. Any concerns you find are also great information to share with an ISA Certified arborist which can be found using the [Trees Are Good website](#).

## Resources

Re-mulch Your Trees

<https://www.purduelandscapereport.org/article/re-mulch-your-trees/0101>

Pruning

<https://www.purduelandscapereport.org/article/can-i-prune-like-the-pros/>

Southwest Damage/Sunscald

<https://www.purduelandscapereport.org/article/southwest-damage-scalding-or-frost-cracking/>

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