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Assessing Winter Damage

page 19

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Why Apply Lime to a Lawn?

Your customers depend on you to keep their lawn healthy and green. Lime is key to achieving this. Applying lime is primarily about maintaining or balancing soil pH withing a certain range of the pH scale of 1 to 14. But first, let me introduce you to what "pH" means. The term pH stands for "potential of Hydrogen" or "power of Hydrogen". The pH scale is a logarithmic measurement system with a pH of 7 being neutral. Anything below 7 is acidic and above 7 is alkaline or basic (basicity). A logarithm is a convenient scale scientist use to measure and represent large ranges of constantly increasing or decreasing values, compactly. (Don't worry if you don't get it at first, it took me a while to make sense of it.) So, using the pH scale we have a way of measuring the concentration of Hydrogen ions (H+) in soil and track its movement. As the pH number moves higher or lower and away from 7, the stronger the acidity or alkalinity. Each whole pH value (number) below 7 is ten times more than the next higher value, for example pH 4 is 10 times more acidic than 5. The same is true when pH moves above 7 into the alkaline range.



Vinnie Drzewucki
Cornell Cooperative Extension of
Nassau County
Senior CNLP & Certified
Arborist

Examples of What This Means:
Acids: Battery Acid is pH 0, Lemon Juice pH 2, Vinegar pH 3, Coffee pH 5.
Neutral: Pure Water pH 7.
Basic/Alkaline: Baking Soda pH 9, Ammonia pH 11, Bleach pH 13.

Over time, lawn and landscape soil pH naturally become more acidic due to heavy rainfall, the use of nitrogen fertilizers, and decaying organic matter. Most lawn grasses prefer and thrive in a slightly acidic to neutral range, a pH of 6.0 to 7.0 with 6.5 being the target.

When soil becomes too acidic (low pH, below 6.0), several problems occur that lime (calcium carbonate) helps fix:

1. Unlocks Nutrients (The "Gatekeeper" Effect)

This is the most critical reason. If soil is too acidic, nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (NPK) and others become "locked" in the soil to soil particles. Your grass cannot absorb them, meaning the money and time you spend on fertilizer is essentially wasted. Lime "unlocks" these nutrients so the grass roots can use them.

2. Adds Essential Minerals

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(continued on Page 7)

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Question: I've heard that fertility can either increase or decrease insect pest activity. Can you explain why?

Answer: Plants that are growing in soils with optimum fertility and experiencing little or no stress generally have significantly lower incidences of (herbivorous) pest damage. The plant's natural resistance is typically higher and so is the incidence of predators. The reasons why increased predation occurs are not clear but trials have shown a notable difference in predator activity where fertility and biological activity are near optimum and stress is minimized. Fertility management, however, is not as easy as it may seem.



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Luxury consumption of plant nutrients is rare in nature and can be as unhealthy to plants as it is to people. Available nutrient levels that are either long or short of optimum can cause stress to plants, and lower their resistance to pathogens and to insects. Insect bodies are almost 50 percent protein, the synthesis of which demands a good source of nitrogen. Herbivorous insects must be able to locate an abundance of relatively soluble nitrogen to survive. A 1983 study showed seventeen of twenty-three plots fertilized with soluble nitrogen resulted in an increase in insect

damage. The fine line between too much and too little nourishment, however, is as important to understand for plant health as it is for human health.

Of all the essential plant nutrients, superfluous or insufficient levels of nitrogen and potassium in the plant seem to have the greatest effect on insect activity.

Excess nitrogen can accumulate in plant tissue as soluble amino acids and nitrates—two forms of nitrogen that not only induce insect feeding but also egg laying. On the other hand, inadequate nitrogen can arrest plant growth and slow the movement of protein and sugars through the plant. These compounds can then accumulate in the leaves and stems. Production of defense compounds can also be suppressed. The weakened plants are typically more susceptible to insect

attack. Optimum levels of nitrogen are not necessarily those that promote the greatest amount of growth, however. Researchers have recently discovered that when maximum plant growth is achieved, the production of allelochemicals (toxic compounds produced by the plant for self-defense) is significantly diminished. Moderately stressed plants seem to produce the greatest amount of defense compounds. It's interesting that

(continued on Page 9)

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Why Apply Lime to a Lawn?

magnesium and other elements (secondary and trace elements and minerals).

- Calcium helps build strong plant cell walls.

- Magnesium and Nitrogen are the central component of chlorophyll, which gives grass its green color and allows it to turn sunlight into energy.

3. Improves Soil Structure & Microbes

- Better Drainage: In heavy clay soils, lime helps bind particles together, creating better "crumb" structure. This improves aeration and water movement. That's why ignoring the soil pH and letting it become more and more acidic, especially in soils with an abundance of clay can become poorly drained, com-

pacted with low oxygen levels and making it unproductive due to diminishing pore space.

- Healthy Bacteria: Beneficial soil microbes and earthworms struggle in highly acidic environments. Lime creates a hospitable home for them, and they, in turn, break down thatch and organic matter to feed your lawn and micro-organisms. Improving soil structure, drainage, water and nutrient holding capacity and aeration.

4. Discourages Weeds and Moss

Common lawn "enemies" like moss and certain weeds (like dandelions, plantains, mosses, Ox-eye Daisy, Hawk-

(continued on Page 12)

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From the Publisher's Desk....
Jerry Siani, Editor and Publisher

Many of the articles appearing in our monthly editions are offered by individuals who are recognized for their expertise in the Green Industry. Most operate their own successful green industry firms and can be contacted directly for further information about their articles or their own services.



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Vinnie Drzewucki

Vinnie Drzewucki is a Horticulture educator, a Senior Lifetime Certified Nursery and Landscape Professional (CNLP) and ISA Certified Arborist providing professional educational topics, pesticide use, integrated pest management (IPM) and best management practices in horticulture and arboriculture - including CNLP and ISA certifications. For questions, diagnostic and soil testing services contact Vinnie directly at drzewucki@aol.com



Paul Sachs

of North Country Organics will be answering reader's questions on soil and organic matters. Got a question? Write to Paul, c/o NY LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR, or call him at North Country Organics, (802) 222-4277 email pds@norganics.com



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Evan Dackow Vice President Jolly Green Tree and Shrub Care, I.S.A. Board Certified Master Arborist NY5666-B, TRAQ certified. Nassau Suffolk Landscape and Grounds Association - Executive Board of Directors, LIAA - President



Nick Menchky

graduated from Clemson University with a B.S. in turfgrass management and a Ph.D in Plant and Environmental Science in 2007 and 2012, respectively. While a graduate student at Clemson, Nick focused on improving foliar fertilization efficiency and turfgrass physiology. Nick began teaching at Farmingdale State College in the fall of 2014 where he continues to educate students about turfgrass best management practices. He can be reached at nicholas.menchky@farmingdale.edu



Roger Feit

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Creator of Quality Tree Service, and now of Treewise, The Organic Experts, offers insights on how small businesses can become more profitable and easier to operate. A former USA national amateur surfing champion, he has been featured in the NY Times, ABC TV News, Channel 55 and local news & radio programs (631) 324-4239



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Deficiencies or superfluities of potassium have an indirect effect on insect activity due to their relationship with nitrogen. Potassium acts in conjunction with nitrogen to accelerate the processing of soluble amino acids and nitrates into proteins by the plant. The less soluble nitrogen there is in the plant, the less attractive it is to herbivorous insects and plant pathogens as well.

Although no specific link has been made to other nutrient deficiencies and insect pest activity, it is reasonable to assume that all components of nutrition for both the plant and soil organisms are equally important. Micronutrients that are needed in only trace amounts, for example, play a major role in the creation of over 5,000 different enzymes necessary for life functions-many of these enzymes provide protection for the plant.

The soil's physical condition, which includes structure and density, can have a big impact on the diversity of soil organisms that regulate fertility. Heavy, wet soils with little porosity can inhibit the existence of many beneficial aerobic or-

ganisms. On the other hand, sandy soils often lack enough moisture to support significant populations of beneficial organisms.

The balance of organisms can affect the availability of nutrients to plants and increase efficiency. Biological activity often corresponds with plant growth and synchronizes availability with need. Biological nutrient management can ensure that plants receive optimal fertility but it cannot occur in environments that lack resources for soil organisms. The proteins, carbohydrates, and other organic compounds in plant residues, compost, and organic fertilizer are food for these valuable organisms.

Factors that we cannot control, such as extremes in precipitation and temperatures, also play a major role in the incidence of pest organisms. While the weather cannot be controlled, producing a strong, healthy plant in a rich and enlivened soil can increase the level of tolerance each plant has for extremes in the climate. Soils with adequate organic matter not only help accomplish this but also buffer extremely wet or dry climates, by increasing the soil's water and air holding capacity.



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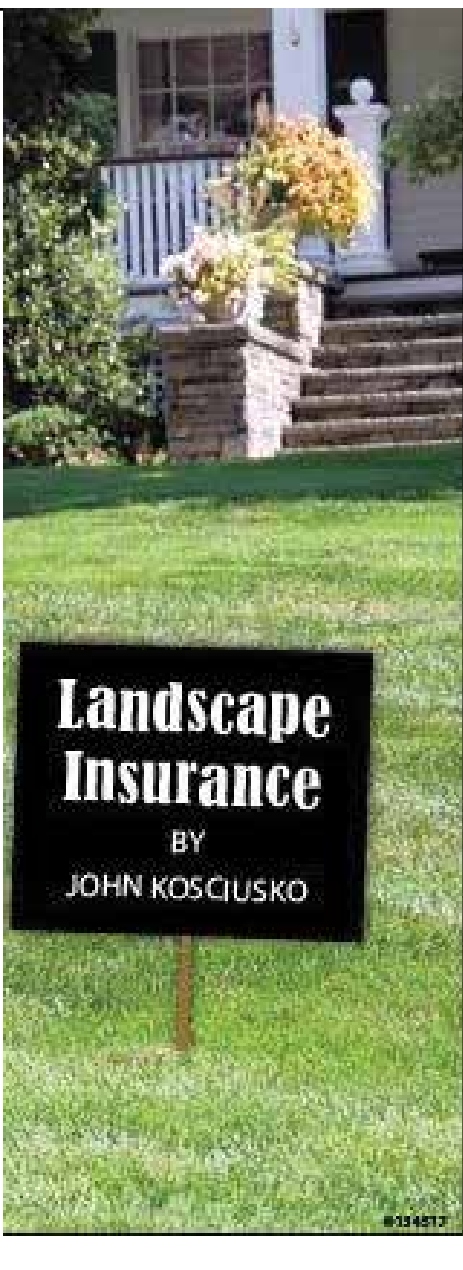
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Concerns about PFAS contamination are increasingly influencing decisions across the turf and landscaping industry. PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances,



are often referred to as “forever chemicals” because they persist in the environment and do not easily break down. In recent years, PFAS have been detected in some biosolids—treated sewage sludge commonly used in fertilizers and soil amendments—raising questions about long-term environmental impact and potential regulatory scrutiny.

Biosolids have long been valued in turf and landscape products for their organic matter and carbon content, which support soil health, improve soil structure, and encourage beneficial microbial activity. However, the potential for PFAS contamination has prompted some manufacturers to seek alternative sources of organic carbon.

LebanonTurf is taking a proactive approach by moving away from biosolids and introducing a new carbon source called EcoPerk. EcoPerk is a granulated material made from recycled spent coffee grounds that provides an effective and environmentally responsible alternative.

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Why Apply Lime to a Lawn?

weed, Mullein, Prostrate knotweed, Bentgrass, and Stinging Nettle, to name a few) actually prefer acidic, low-nutrient soil. By raising the pH and making the grass thicker, healthier and more vigorous, you make it much harder for weeds to move in.

How do you know if you need it?

You shouldn't apply lime blindly, as "sweetening" (an old fashion term used by old timers) the soil too much (making it too alkaline) can be just as damaging as high acidity.

Common signs you might need lime:

- Fertilizer doesn't seem to be working.
- Moss is spreading across the lawn.

- Grass is yellowing or looks "thin" despite watering.
- Your soil has a high clay or sand content.

Pro Tip: Test, Don't Guess. The only way to be 100% sure is a soil test. These are inexpensive and will tell you exactly how many pounds of lime you need per 1,000 square feet.

Best Time to Apply Lime

The best time of the year to apply lime to your lawn is in the fall (September through November). While you can technically apply

it in the spring, fall is widely considered the "gold standard" for a few key reasons:

Why Fall is Best

- The "Freeze-Thaw" Cycle: As the ground freezes and thaws throughout the winter, it naturally opens and closes the soil. This movement helps pull the lime deeper into the root zone where it's needed most.

- Time to React: Lime is slow-acting, slow to move the pH; it can take 3 to 6 months to significantly change your soil's pH. Applying it in the fall ensures the soil is "sweetened" and ready by the time the spring growing season begins.

- Weather Conditions: Fall usually provides

consistent rain to help dissolve the lime pellets, but the soil isn't as waterlogged as it can be in early spring.

The Spring Alternative

If you missed the fall window, early spring is the next best choice.

- The Catch: Avoid applying lime during the heat of summer or when the grass is wilted from drought, as this can stress the lawn.

- Fertilizer Gap: If you apply lime in the spring, try to wait at least 2 weeks before applying nitrogen fertilizer. Applying them at the exact same time can cause a chemical reaction with ammonium based fertilizers that converts the nitrogen into (ammonia) gas, wasting your fertilizer and under certain conditions (chemically burning) the grass blades to brown and sometime damaging the crown and stolons.

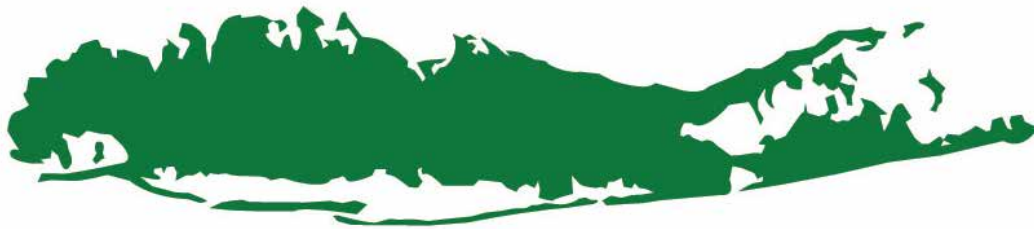
Important Application Rules

1. Avoid Frozen Ground: Don't apply lime if the ground is frozen solid; the pellets will just sit on the surface and wash away when the snow melts.

2. Split the Dose: If your soil test suggests a heavy application (usually over 50 lbs per 1,000 sq. ft.), it is best to split the dose—apply half in the fall and the other half the following spring to avoid overwhelming the soil and damage to turfgrass.

3. Core Aeration: If you plan to aerate your lawn, do it right before liming. The holes created by the aerator act like "express lanes," allowing the lime to reach the deep soil much faster.

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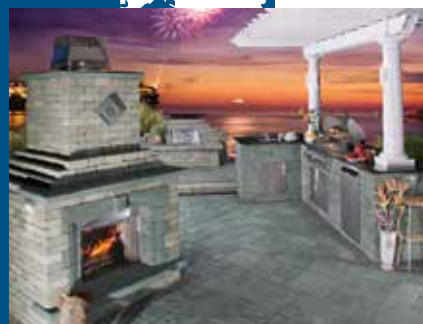
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Assessing Winter Damage

I think there's little argument that we have just experienced a once in a decade winter. Good for snow business....but, bad for the landscape.

We asked Chatgpt to discuss the various problems facing landscapers as we dive into the heart of spring clean-up:

Fertilization plays an important role in recovery. Applying a balanced, slow-release fertilizer in early spring gives your lawn the nutrients it needs to bounce back. Look for a fertilizer with a mix of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium to support root development and overall growth. Be careful not to



Snow mold, a fungal disease thrives under long lasting snow cover.

LAWN DAMAGE

Winter can be tough on lawns, especially in regions where prolonged snow cover and freezing temperatures are common. By early spring, homeowners often find patches of dead grass, matted turf, or areas affected by mold and compaction. Fortunately, with the right approach, lawns damaged by winter conditions can be effectively repaired and restored to healthy growth.

One of the most common issues after snowmelt is snow mold, a fungal disease that thrives under long-lasting snow cover. It appears as gray or pinkish patches of matted grass. The first step in repairing this damage is to gently rake the affected areas. This helps break up the matted grass, improves air circulation, and allows the soil to dry out, which discourages further fungal growth. Avoid aggressive raking, however, as the grass is still fragile in early spring.

Another frequent problem is soil compaction caused by heavy snow and foot traffic on frozen ground. Compacted soil restricts root growth and limits the flow of water, air, and nutrients. Aeration is an effective solution. Using a core aerator to remove small plugs of soil loosens the ground and creates channels for essential elements to reach the grassroots. This process is best done when the soil is moist but not overly wet.

Bare or thinning patches are also typical after winter damage. Overseeding is the best way to fill in these areas. Start by loosening the top layer of soil with a rake, then apply a high-quality grass seed that matches your existing lawn type. Lightly cover the seeds with soil or compost to protect them from birds and drying out. Consistent watering is crucial during this stage—keep the soil moist until the new grass is well established.

over-fertilize, as this can stress the lawn and lead to further issues.

Proper watering is another key factor. After winter, lawns often need a steady but moderate amount of moisture. Water deeply but infrequently to encourage deep root growth. Early morning watering is ideal, as it reduces evaporation and allows the grass to dry during the day, minimizing disease risk.

Finally, patience and proper mowing practices are essential. Wait until the grass reaches about 3 to 4 inches before the first mow, and never cut more than one-third of the grass blade at a time. Keeping mower blades sharp ensures clean cuts and reduces stress on recovering grass.

Repairing winter-damaged lawns takes time, but with consistent care—raking, aerating, overseeding, fertilizing, and proper watering—your lawn can recover and thrive. By addressing problems early in the season, you set the stage for a lush, green landscape throughout the warmer months.

DAMAGE TO SHRUBS

Winter can be one of the harshest seasons for shrubs and landscaping. Snow loads, ice accumulation, freezing temperatures, fluctuating thaws, road salt, hungry deer, and drying winds can all leave lasting damage. By early spring, homeowners often find broken branches, browned foliage, split bark, and weakened root systems. Fortunately, with the right approach, most winter damage can be repaired—and future problems minimized.

Understanding Common Types of Winter Damage

Before making repairs, it's important to

(continued on Page 21)

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Assessing Winter Damage

identify what kind of damage occurred.

Desiccation (Winter Burn):

Evergreen shrubs such as boxwood, rhododendron, and arborvitae often suffer from winter burn. Cold winds and frozen soil prevent roots from absorbing water, while foliage continues to lose moisture. The result is brown or scorched leaves,



usually on the wind-exposed side.

Snow and Ice Breakage:

Heavy snow can bend and split branches, particularly on upright evergreens. Ice storms can cause entire limbs to snap under the weight.

Salt Damage:

In areas where sidewalks and roads are treated, salt spray or runoff can injure nearby plantings. Symptoms include leaf scorch, dieback, and poor spring growth.

Frost Heaving:

Repeated freeze-thaw cycles can push shallow-rooted shrubs upward, exposing roots and destabilizing plants.

Animal Browsing:

Winter food scarcity often drives deer

and rabbits to feed on ornamental shrubs, leaving ragged edges and stripped bark.

Accurate diagnosis ensures that repairs address the true source of the problem.

(continued on Page 22)



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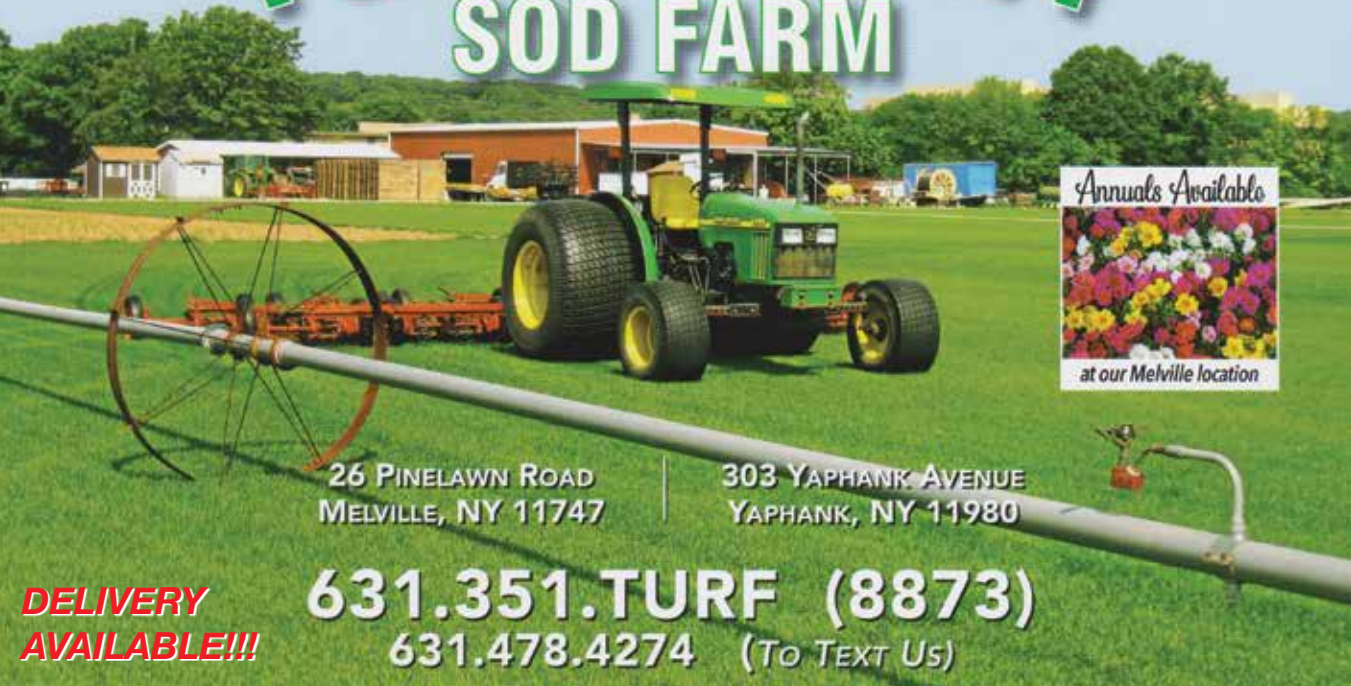
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Assessing Winter Damage

Step 1: Assess Before You Prune

Resist the urge to immediately cut back everything that looks brown. Some shrubs may leaf out later than expected. Perform a simple scratch test: lightly scrape the bark with a fingernail or pruners. Green tissue beneath indicates the branch is still alive. Brown and dry means it is dead and can be removed.

Wait until the danger of severe frost has passed before doing major pruning. Early spring—just before active growth begins—is usually ideal.

Step 2: Prune Properly

Pruning is the primary method of repairing winter damage.

Remove Broken Branches:

Cut cleanly back to the nearest healthy lateral branch or the main stem. Avoid leaving stubs, which can invite disease.

Thin Damaged Growth:

If only branch tips are burned, prune just above a healthy bud. This encourages new growth and helps reshape the plant.

Reshape Carefully:

Avoid heavy shearing unless absolutely necessary. Many shrubs recover best when selectively pruned rather than uniformly trimmed.

Disinfect Tools:

Especially when pruning diseased wood, clean tools between cuts to prevent spreading pathogens.

For large shrubs or ornamental trees with significant structural damage, consulting a certified arborist may be advisable.

Step 3: Address Salt Injury

If you suspect salt damage:

Flush the soil thoroughly with water in early spring to leach excess salts beyond the root zone.

Apply a 2–3 inch layer of organic mulch to help retain moisture and improve soil structure.

Avoid fertilizing immediately, as this can further stress damaged roots.

In severe cases, replacing soil near sidewalks or redirecting runoff may be necessary to prevent future injury.

Step 4: Re-anchor Frost-Heaved Plants

If shrubs have been lifted from the ground:

- Gently press the root ball back into place once soil is workable.
- Firm the soil around the base to eliminate air pockets.
- Water thoroughly to settle the soil.
- Add mulch to insulate roots and regulate temperature fluctuations.

Avoid stepping heavily on saturated soil, which can cause compaction.

Step 5: Fertilize Thoughtfully

Spring fertilization can support recovery, but timing and type matter.

(continued on Page 25)

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Assessing Winter Damage

- Use a slow-release, balanced fertilizer once new growth begins.
- Avoid high-nitrogen products too early, which can encourage tender growth vulnerable to late frosts.
- Conduct a soil test if damage is widespread; nutrient imbalances may be contributing factors.

Healthy soil encourages stronger root systems and better resilience next winter.

Healthy soil encourages stronger root systems and better resilience next winter.

Step 6: Encourage Recovery Through Proper Watering

Even after winter ends, shrubs recovering from desiccation need consistent moisture. Provide deep, infrequent watering rather than frequent shallow watering. This promotes deeper root growth.

Monitor rainfall and adjust irrigation accordingly. Overwatering can be just as harmful as drought stress.

Step 7: Repair Structural Landscape Elements

Winter damage isn't limited to plants. Freeze-thaw cycles can crack stonework, lift pavers, and shift edging.

- Reset displaced pavers once soil has stabilized.
- Repair cracked mortar in retaining walls.
- Replace broken stakes or supports.

Inspect irrigation systems for freeze damage before activating them.

Addressing hardscape issues early prevents larger repairs later in the season.

Step 8: Replace When Necessary

Sometimes damage is too severe for recovery. Indicators that replacement is warranted include:

- Extensive bark splitting around the trunk
- More than 50% dieback
- Severe root exposure and instability
- No green tissue during scratch testing

When replacing shrubs, consider selecting varieties better suited to your local climate and exposure conditions. Native plants often demonstrate greater resilience.

Preventing Future Winter Damage

Repair is only half the equation; prevention reduces repeat problems.

Mulching:

Apply a 2–3 inch layer of mulch in late fall to moderate soil temperatures and conserve moisture.

Watering Before Freeze:

Deeply water evergreens before the ground freezes to prevent winter burn.

Anti-Desiccant Sprays:

Products applied to evergreen foliage in late fall can reduce moisture loss during winter winds.

Physical Barriers:

Burlap screens can shield vulnerable shrubs from wind and salt spray. Deer fencing or repellents help deter browsing.

Proper Planting Location:

Avoid placing salt-sensitive plants near roadways. Consider wind exposure when planning new landscaping.

Snow Management Practices:

Gently brush off heavy snow from branches using an upward motion. Never try to remove ice, which can cause additional breakage.

When to Seek Professional Help

If winter damage is extensive across

multiple plantings, or if large ornamental trees are affected, a landscape professional can provide expert evaluation. They may recommend corrective pruning, soil amendments, or redesign strategies to improve resilience.

Professional guidance is especially valuable when dealing with high-value specimen plants or complex irrigation and drainage systems.

Patience Is Key

One of the most important aspects of repairing winter damage is patience. Many shrubs appear worse in early spring than they truly are. Given time, proper care, and favorable weather, plants often rebound surprisingly well.

New buds may emerge from seemingly bare stems. Browning foliage

may be replaced by fresh growth. What initially looks catastrophic can become merely cosmetic by midsummer.

Final Thoughts

Winter's impact on shrubs and landscaping can be discouraging, but most damage is manageable with prompt, informed action. Begin with careful assessment, prune strategically, support root recovery, and adjust care practices moving forward. At the same time, invest in preventative measures that strengthen plant health before cold weather returns.

With thoughtful repair and proactive planning, your landscape can recover from winter stress and return to full vitality—often stronger and more resilient than before.



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