

# Early fall color is bad sign



Autumn is here. The nights are getting cooler and tree leaves are starting to change color.

As much as I welcome autumn, no one should be happy to see a tree changing its colors early in the season. Such a tree is under stress—it may be strangling itself to death!

Early fall color is usually caused by a root-related stress. The tree is not getting the water and nutrients it needs to all of its branches. This leads to a breakdown of green tissues in the leaves, creating early fall color.

Look carefully at how the trunk enters into the ground. The trunk of a healthy tree will flare out at the base. The trunks of unhealthy trees enter the ground as straight as a telephone pole. These trees may be suffering from a major root that is wrapping itself around the trunk, choking the tree.

This “girdling” is becoming a major problem on 20-30 year old maple trees in our state. Trying to remove these strangling roots may help (especially for young trees just beginning to show the symptoms). In most cases though, the damage is irreparable. And sometimes the strangling root is deep beneath the ground and not accessible to us.

Most of these girdled trees will slowly die out.


Cracked bark or spliced roots can also create stress, as this damage reduces the flow of nutrients and water up the tree.

Nurture these damaged trees. Water them during dry periods or fertilize them if the leaves are small-sized or sparse within the canopy.

Why would a tree strangle itself to death? We don't know

why, but it is often related to trees planted too deeply. It's very common for a tree in North Dakota to be planted deep in the ground because we don't want the tree to blow away.

A tree should be planted so that the first major set of roots (the crown roots) is just slightly below the surface. For balled-and-burlapped trees, this sometimes means we need to remove several inches of soil from the top of the soil ball when planting.

When planting trees, keep the following phrase in mind: “Plant a tree *high* and it won't *die*—plant a tree *low* and it won't *grow!*” 

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Published September 2010  
Revised October 2011