

Stressed Spruce

What's killing my spruce? The needles are turning reddish brown, the whole tree looks thin and some branches appear to be dying... Help! – Rita B.

Spruce are stressed and dying throughout the Intermountain West. The *ISJ* even did a front page story about Pocatello's spruce problems on May 20.

The main culprit is drought. Spruce have particularly shallow root systems, and their natural habitat is moist, cool mountain areas. Small wonder that years of dry weather are taking their toll on our city spruce.

The best thing you can do for your stressed spruce is to water it.

You may think you're watering trees when you water your lawn, but sprinklers water shallowly so the grass gets most of the water. The deeper roots of trees need infrequent and deep (at least 15 inches) watering. Coil a soaker hose at the tree's dripline and midway between trunk and dripline, and let it drip overnight. To test how deeply you've watered, poke a straightened metal hanger or very long screwdriver into the earth until it meets the resistance of dry soil. Deep watering once a month should be enough. If your spruce looks stressed, water every other week for the first month.

Don't expect immediate recovery. Be patient and check soil moisture before watering to prevent overwatering. Sadly, some trees are simply too far gone to recover. Once a spruce shows obvious signs of stress, it may be too late to save it.

Stressed trees are also more vulnerable to insects and disease.

The spruce bark beetle has been found in a number of stressed and dead spruce in Pocatello. These small brown beetles begin their attack in spruce tops. They can move down the trunk within several months, killing the entire tree. If your tree has beetles, all you can do is remove it—ASAP and all the way to the landfill—to prevent the spread of beetles to nearby spruce.

Preventive sprays protect uninfected trees for the short term. If you go this route, hire a licensed professional to do the work.

The only long-term solution is to maintain tree health: water, mulch, and protect.

For more on the spruce bark beetle check out the following website:

<http://www.ffsl.utah.gov/ID/IpsBarkBeetle.pdf>

~ Sandra Thorne-Brown, a Pocatello Tree Commission member, is an urban forester.