

Fall Needle Drop

Dear Tree Talk, The needles on my pine trees are turning yellow and brown. Help! - Mary B.

Are the browning needles the ones closest to the trunk? If so, then I suspect that what you are seeing is natural needle drop.

Pine trees are called evergreens because they retain some green needles all year. The newest needles are on the branch tips, two-year-old needles are behind them, three-year-old needles behind the two-year-olds, and so forth. The oldest needles are closest to the trunk. And it is the oldest needles that are shed each year.

Different species retain their needles different lengths of time. Consequently, cycles or patterns for each species develop, although there is variation from tree to tree or year to year.

Scotch and ponderosa pine retain needles for three years. Austrian and Swiss stone pine needles generally last four years. Bosnian and mugo pine needles live for five years. Spruce and fir needles generally live for five to seven years or more, depending on the species. And so their needle drop is not as noticeable as that on pine.

Needle drop is triggered by the weather and the seasons and may be gradual over several weeks or months or may happen quite suddenly. Drop is also dependent on the species, its health, and environmental conditions. Trees under stress may lose more than one year's needles at a time.

As long as the needles at the tips of your pine are green and healthy, you have nothing to worry about. If you suspect there is something else going on, take a sample to a local nursery or to the U of I Extension Agent for diagnosis.