

White-Pine Needles Turning Brown

Cause: Last year's weather; problem shouldn't have lasting effects



Wherever white pine grows in New Hampshire, people are seeing yellow and brown needles dropping. Homeowners and forest landowners are calling foresters in record numbers wondering what's wrong with the white pines and if they will survive. White-pine needles are supposed to turn yellow and brown and fall off, but in the fall, not in June.

Kyle Lombard, forest health specialist with the N.H. Division of Forests and Lands says, "We are seeing a couple different disease fungi causing white pine needlecast (needle drop). We started seeing a little needlecast here and there in the last few years, but this year it's epic."

The yellow and brown needles we see this year are the result of last year's weather.

Above-average precipitation in May and June of 2009 promoted fungal infections on interior needles as they were developing new shoots. The wet weather in the spring of 2008 also likely contributed to the build up of needlecast diseases.

The damage may look serious, but the trees aren't dying. Trees will look better soon, once all the injured needles fall and the new needles expand. Sullivan County Cooperative Extension forester resources educator Chuck Hersey says, "Already the trees are looking better. The wind and heavy rain this past weekend brought a lot of the yellow needles down."

Lombard agrees. "Unless we have many years of damage, there shouldn't be lasting effects on tree health," he says, but he cautions, "The tops may look thin through the rest of the year especially since last year's heavy pine-cone crop left many top branches with sparse foliage even before this needlecast outbreak."

"This year's new needles are green and generally healthy," says Cheryl Smith, plant health specialist with UNH Cooperative Extension. She echoes the positive outlook for the white pine, but says people may see more dead lower branches than usual or further weakening of trees already unhealthy from other stresses.

Will this spring's weather cause needles to drop next spring?

It depends. "This spring's weather has been generally dry as the needles developed. If the drier weather continues through June, there should be less needlecast in June, 2011," says Lombard.

According to Smith, "The recent rainy weather may allow for some new infections, but the lack of prolonged wet weather should favor the growth of a healthy crop of new needles."

State Forester Brad Simpkins says people don't need to call with more reports of white-pine browning.

But he does encourage people to report other tree problems. "We're always on the lookout, and reports from tree owners and landowners help us detect potentially dangerous insect and disease problems."

Call the N.H. Division of Forests and Lands forest health office at 464-3016 to report other tree health problems or the UNH Cooperative Extension Info Line at 1-877-EXT-GROW for information about keeping your trees healthy.

by Karen Bennett, UNH Cooperative Extension Forestry Specialist

Photo credit: Cheryl Smith

Posted June 7, 2010