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Don't Neglect your Evergreens this Winter

Watering plants in the winter is one task that sometimes slips the mind of homeowners, but is crucially important for any evergreen plants in your garden. Unlike deciduous plants, evergreen plants do not go dormant in colder temperatures and continually go through photosynthesis and respiration throughout the winter months. These processes require water, and if there is no precipitation, the plants will lose water overall. You can tell when evergreens are dehydrated when the leaves on the plants begin crumbling along the tips and edges of the leaves. This is known as marginal leaf scorch, and it occurs because the plant cannot replace water in the leaves faster than it is used.

To water plants during the winter, your timing is crucial to make sure that the plants stay healthy. Checking the weather before watering will show you the right timing for warm days and nights above freezing when water will do the best. Just remember to use a watering can, or drain the water from any hose that you use so that you don't have a freeze to destroy your garden equipment accidentally. Watering immediately before a freeze creates the possibility of killing the plant's roots and eventually the plant.

Marginal leaf scorch becomes severe in periods of high temperature, so why does this also happen in the winter with evergreens? One reason is that evergreen plants never go dormant and need a consistent supply of water, but the primary reason is because of the low humidity in the winter. Leaves have openings called stomata which open when the plant needs to take in carbon dioxide for photosynthesis and release oxygen. Because evergreen plants don't go dormant, they are constantly undergoing photosynthesis, and these pores open and close even throughout the winter months. When these pores open, water can evaporate out, compounding water use and loss.

Water will move from areas of high concentration – in the leaf – to areas of low concentration – the outside air. If the water isn't replaced by uptake through the roots, the leaves dry up and scorch. In the summer, the evaporated water minimizes future water loss by increasing the humidity immediately around the leaf, but in the winter, the wind is so dry that any evaporated water and humid air is quickly carried away, allowing for more water to evaporate out. Species that suffer from winter dehydration include boxwoods, hollies, and spruces. Pines are typically the evergreen exception for winter watering because their leaves – the needles – are so thin that the pores water can evaporate out of are much smaller than on other evergreen species and deciduous trees.

Although marginal leaf scorch can look alarming, most plants will snap out of the funk and push out a new set of leaves once the temperatures warm up. However, marginal leaf scorch can still stress plants out, making them more susceptible to other problems, so it is an issue you want to address before it becomes severe enough to completely defoliate your evergreens.

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