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Why are My Oaks and Conifers Turning Brown?
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Many of us have purchased our homes because of the natural beauty that surrounds us here in the foothills, including our magnificent oaks and conifers. Residents are rightly concerned when they see something out of the ordinary with their trees, and they frequently contact the Master Gardeners.

With regards to oaks, the most common concern for several years has been that the leaves are turning brown during the summer. This is usually normal. During times of stress caused by drought, deciduous oaks (the blue, black and valley oaks) will shed their leaves in summer to prevent water loss through their leaves. This is an adaptation to our Mediterranean climate, with wet winters, dry summers, and frequent droughts. Older oaks have lived through many droughts and will probably continue to live if not adversely affected by human activity, such as compressing the soil over the roots, or building on top of them. This can prevent water and air from reaching roots.

Yet another mistake is to plant anything under the canopy of the tree that needs to be watered. Subjecting them to moisture during warm weather can lead to crown root rot and oak root fungus, which will eventually kill the trees. Planting under oaks is never a good idea because it disturbs the vital small roots, which are in the top 3 feet of soil. Anything you do plant should be native species that need little to no summer water once established.

It is generally not necessary to water older oak trees during the summer, but if you do, do so several times in the late spring and early fall. Watering should be slow and deep and the hose should be well away from the trunk, in the zone under the drip line of the tree. Put down a 3 inch layer of mulch, or let tree leaves remain where they fall, as they help preserve soil moisture and contribute nutrients to the roots.

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Problems with the appearance of conifers are more problematic and harder to diagnose. While conifers are affected by many disease and insects, they usually recover. All of our local conifers shed some needles naturally in the fall, sometimes in little clumps that turn brown and sometimes individually. If needles are green at the base, or if the green is scattered through the crown, the tree is probably not dying. Tip browning all over the tree could indicate some sort of root stress, including various fungi, drought, or too much water. Dead needles on just one side of the tree or one branch may also be caused by environmental factors. A conifer whose leaves have turned uniformly brown or red is dead. It will not recover. The cause of death could be drought, a disease, or if it occurred within a month, beetle-kill.

To help the Master Gardeners help you, please send us pictures of your sick tree. We will ask you a lot of questions to help in the diagnosis, including how long the problem has gone on, the age of the tree, its growing conditions, and whether more than one tree is affected. You can also contact the Forest Stewardship Hotline, at 1-800-738-TREE or e-mail forestryhelp@gmail.com. If you are comfortable on the internet you can try the UC ANR Integrated Pest Management diagnostic tool at <http://www2.ipm.ucanr.edu/diagnostics/>.

There is no Master Gardener public education class this weekend.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/mastergardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.