

Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

FACT SHEET



Have Gardening Questions? The **Master Gardener Help Line Hours** are 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. on Fridays (all year) as well as Wednesdays (March-November) and Mondays (April-October).
Phone: 617-933-4929 Email: mghelpline@masshort.org.

Winter Damage

Harsh New England winters can cause a great deal of damage to the landscape. Cold, sun, wind and salt, as well as the weight of snow and ice, can result in damaged foliage and bark, dead or injured branches, buds, and roots. Rodents and deer feed on foliage, buds, twigs and bark. You can take steps in the spring to reduce the damage.

Some of the most visible effects of winter are the dried out, brown leaves of broadleaf evergreens, such as boxwood, ilex, rhododendrons, pieris, and andromeda. The damage is frequently due to desiccation — water evaporating from the leaves that cannot be replaced by the dormant root system. If the plant was not watered deeply before the ground froze, and the leaves coated with a protectant such as Wilt-Pruf, the leaves' cell structure can break down, brown and die. In mid-spring, remove dead leaves, buds and twigs. Sometimes an entire branch must be removed. If you are unsure if it is dead, scratch the bark with your thumbnail to see if any live green tissue is revealed. Using a sharp pruner, cut dead branches within a quarter inch above a live bud or to the branch collar of the nearest live branch.

The weight of snow and ice causes significant damage to trees and shrubs each year. Wait until spring, as the plants come out of dormancy, to evaluate winter damage. When plant tissue is damaged and dead, it must be removed so as not to encourage disease or insect infestation. Using a sharp pruner, cut dead branches within a quarter inch above a live bud or to the branch collar of the nearest live branch. If branches are large and high, you should contact a certified arborist to perform this removal.

Deer and rodents such as voles, mice and rabbits can cause severe damage to bark branches and kill entire trees, shrubs or herbaceous perennials. In the spring, cut the dead bark back to live tissue with sharp pruners to facilitate healing.

Roots can also be damaged during winter, especially by repeated freezing and thawing when there is no snow cover. The crown and roots of perennials and of newly-planted shrubs are pushed out of the ground. Check your plants throughout the winter and push them back into the ground, or if that is not possible, mulch over the plant for protection.

Salt spread on walkways and streets during the winter leaches into the soil changing the soil structure and reducing the availability of nutrients, water and oxygen. Snow scraped from the roads and pushed into large piles by plows can be particularly harmful. When road salt splashes on plant foliage and stems, it may damage or kill the plant. Spray foliage and flush the plant's root area with water in early spring to help remove salt from the soil.

Spring snow melt may reveal your lawn with matted, crusty looking patches with a layer of cottony white snow. This fungus, called snow mold, occurs when snow or leaves have stayed on the lawn creating the proper conditions. Prevent snow mold by mowing the lawn to 2 inches or less in the late fall and skipping late fertilizer applications. The grass may dry up and die when the soil warms. Dead grass should be raked up, and the lawn overseeded as necessary.

The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics. <http://www.massmastergardeners.org/>