

I Don't Really Hate Evergreens

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I was recently visiting with a homeowner about what trees to plant. At one point in the conversation the homeowner asked me why I hated evergreen trees. Okay, just for the record, I do not hate evergreen trees. I am actually quite fond of pines, spruces, and firs, as long as they are growing somewhere else other than Kansas!

The first thing you have to understand about evergreen trees is that there is only one species of evergreen native to Kansas, the Eastern Red Cedar. Which, by the way, isn't even a true cedar, it is a juniper, *Juniperus virginiana* to be precise. We have no native pines, spruces or firs! There is two main, reasons why we only have one native evergreen.

The very thing that caused Kansas to be a prairie state, fire, makes it very difficult for evergreen trees to survive. You've seen how cedars go up in black smoke and flames during spring pasture burning haven't you? Pines and spruces are even more sensitive to fire and a bigger fire risk. But the second thing that makes Kansas un-welcoming to evergreens is the weather. Two portions of our drastic weather patterns seem to be the most challenging; long dry spells and hot summer nights.

There are evergreens that are actually quite drought tolerant. But they tend to grow in higher elevations where, in the summer, it cools down at night (and by cool I mean at least below 70 degrees and preferably below 60). There are also evergreens, pines especially, that can take hot summer nights. But they thrive in areas of higher humidity, higher rainfall and much milder winters.

Our extreme climate and wild weather swings make it very difficult to grow any evergreens other than our red cedar and even it is challenged at times. Because we can't do anything about the weather, homeowners are always wanting to find an insect or a disease to blame, and treat, for the demise of a blue spruce or a pine tree. In some cases we can find insect and/or disease issues involved, but they are more often an artifact, an issue that has moved in as the final nail in the coffin, so to speak, after the tree has already been severely stressed by the weather. Once the tree is environmentally stressed it essentially becomes a flashing neon light to insects and diseases. Just like when we become stressed and get sick, the tree is less capable of defending itself against these threats and its conditions begins to decline.

Now, with all that said, I also want you to know that you will probably start seeing a lot of yellow needles showing up in pine trees in the next couple of week. These yellow needles will then start to fall off. **DON'T WORRY!** These yellow needles should be quite a ways back on the branch, not out at the end, and this is normal. Needles only live for a few years and then they start to get shaded by newer growth and the tree just sheds them. So yellow needles falling off aren't a problem. However, needles that turn brown and stay on the tree, especially at the end of the branches, are a problem and you need to call me!

Planting a tree and getting it developed into a nice size tree is a major investment of effort, money and time. So when I discourage you from planting virtually any evergreen tree, it isn't because I don't like them. I just don't want to see you go through all that effort only to have the tree die in 20 years leaving a hole in your landscape!