



**Spencer Horticultural Solutions**

# Homegrown Horticulture

TIPS FOR SUCCESS IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

## Assessing Winter Injury

Even plants that are rated as hardy for our zone can sometimes struggle to stay healthy and productive and may suffer slight to severe injury in some years.

Environmental factors such as fluctuating temperatures, desiccating winds, varying precipitation and snow loads, as well as plant-related factors (such as age, health, etc.) can influence whether plants are damaged or not.

As winter conditions leave us, sometimes reluctantly, and as spring settles in, plants slowly emerge from the snow cover and we have a chance to assess their post-winter health. We eagerly look for signs that for our woody and non-woody perennials are waking up. As the snow recedes, look for specific signs of life. In general, you will see buds start to swell, rounding out the pointy parts on sticks. Trees will start to produce their flowers and seeds, depending on the type. Perennials will show fresh new shoots at the base of the plant, pushing past any old growth that remains. Grass will start to turn from brown to green and new growth will be evident on evergreens.

Based on what you observe, it is possible to determine the potential for the coming season. Damage or other signs that things are not entirely perfect are often apparent. It can be challenging to decipher the signs, but it can also be interesting to follow the clues. Patience is required when looking for damage. Some plants take longer to wake up than others, and things like an insulating layer of bark mulch, a cooler, shadier location, or a stretch of cold weather can slow things down.

Signs that plants may have experienced slight to severe damage at some point during winter range from subtle to obvious. Not all damage is caused by the weather, but simply happens in wintertime.

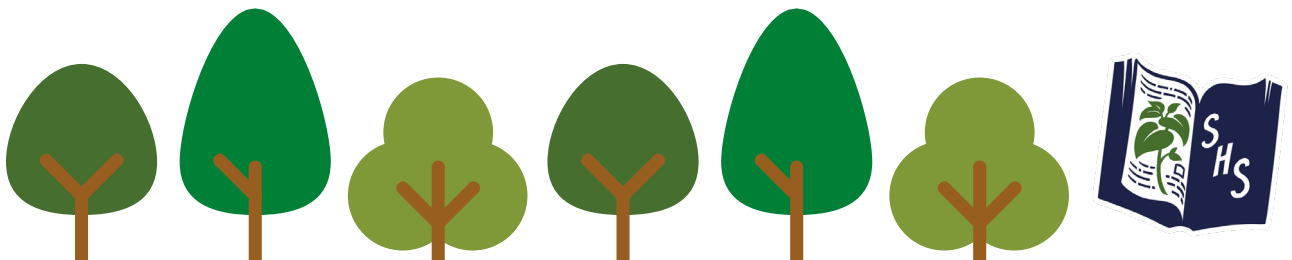
It is easy to think that something is dead when, in fact, it is just taking its time. So, be patient. For woody plants, look closely to see if buds are swelling and becoming more rounded, if bud scales are starting to separate, and if other signs of life are evident. Compare plants to others around it, looking for similar species and judging the progress of your plants compared to those plants.

For perennials, you have to consider the effects of the local microclimate on the plants, as this will directly affect how quickly the soil warms up and how quickly plants start to grow again. Some plants emerge from below the soil; if you simply cannot wait, gently move the soil aside from the surface, looking for new growth. Sometimes perennials will surprise you. A few warm days and they will practically jump out of the ground.

Dead plants will pull easily out of the ground, have black, rotted parts, and never send up new growth.

### Thin / weak plant stands

Even with extra protection, sometimes our perennial plants can take a beating from Mother Nature. One sign that plants are not 100 percent is when the stand is thin and weak. You might notice that where there should be a fairly solid block of plants - as noted in years past - there might be holes and gaps. If the plants were a bit on the weak side going into winter, or if spring is harsh and/or wet, or if a pathogen has taken hold of the ground and the planting, you might see a deterioration in the overall stand health. This might show up as a thinner plant stand, with smaller plants, missing plants, or just unthrifty growth. Plants might be pale, discoloured, or dead plants will be observed.





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Consider strawberries, for example. If you have an established bed of strawberries, maybe there are plants missing, or the plants that are there look small, weak or generally unthrifty. You might notice that some plants are green and growing and other are brown/black and are doing nothing. To connect the final dots, you might look back and remember that the insulating layer of snow was thin, or that bed was a bit exposed, or it was an older planting and went into winter weak.

## ***What do you do about it?***

The general recommendation for overcoming a weak stand in perennial crops is to provide a bit of TLC, in the form of extra nitrogen fertilizer, and taking any sort of corrective action to improve the situation. This might include fixing drainage issues, providing better protections (e.g. insulated cover, such as straw, etc. or shelterbelts). If things are too far gone, you may need to just pull the crop and start over after a break from that area. If you suspect a disease issue, you should figure out what the culprit is, so that you can see if there is a specific solution.

## **Distinct contrasts / Obvious Damage**

Sometimes damage stands out because of the contrast between normal, healthy growth and a dead or damaged area. If you notice that an entire branch of a plant fails to bud or leaf out when the rest of the plant does, that is a fairly good sign that that part of the plant is injured or dead. Look for dry, brittle, gray branches, or darkened areas.

Sometimes you will observe physical damage to the plant, often by some external force, whether animal or something else. Broken branches can occur due to sudden, heavy snows. Split trunks can be evidence of exposure to winter thawing by direct sunlight in some species, or something else. A visit by hungry critters can show up as gnawed bark or nibbled twigs, giving plants the appearance of a bad haircut.

Ultimately, the most important part of recognizing winter injury is noting normal growth for a comparison. When damage or injury is noted, gather as much information as you can, to eliminate different causes, and get closer to a solution.

## ***What do you do about it?***

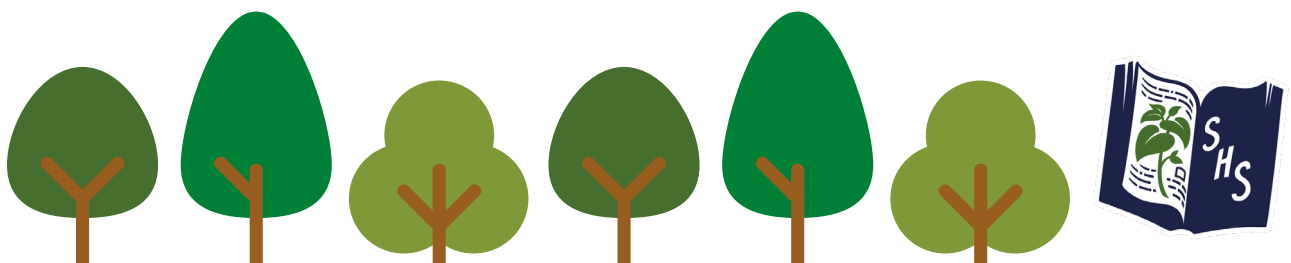
Prune or clip off any dead parts. They aren't contributing anything and are an open door for diseases.

## **Tunnels in the grass**

Throughout the winter, under the piles and drifts of snow, it is hard to imagine that a complex superhighway of activity is underway. As the snow recedes, you can see that something has been moving freely around the plants. In some cases, this visual evidence will be the final link to be made between weak or damaged plants and the culprit.

## ***What do you do about it?***

There isn't much that you can do to prevent tunneling under the piles of snow, but you can either try and keep the population down in advance or make it harder for pests to get close to the plants that you care about. Population control comes through exposing the pests to the eyes and tummies of predators, mainly by keeping grasses and other covers mowed or cut to a lower height. If you have rows of plants, you can crush and compress the snow down on either side, by walking, snowshoeing, skiing or some other way. It is not a perfect plan, but it might help.



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## **Missing bark**

Sometimes we see that some critter has removed the bark entirely or in part from the base (or some higher level) of the plant. When the bark is shredded or removed from ground level upwards, we can tell that something was nibbling sheltered by the snow cover. In other cases, you can see damage that starts a foot or so from the ground, raising the question of how the perpetrator decided that that was the spot to eat. If you take into account the snow level, it becomes clear that Bugs, Flopsy or Cottontail took advantage of the snowbanks to have a munch on the lower bark at their height at the time.

### ***What do you do about it?***

Depending on the type of plant that has been damaged, and the nature of the pest, you might have to take a different approach. For single or multi-trunk trees and shrubs, a physical protective barrier would be recommended. Wrapping with chicken wire or a trunk wrap can help keep the critters from chewing. Keep in mind that some problems can come from below, so make sure that the barrier extends downward sufficiently.

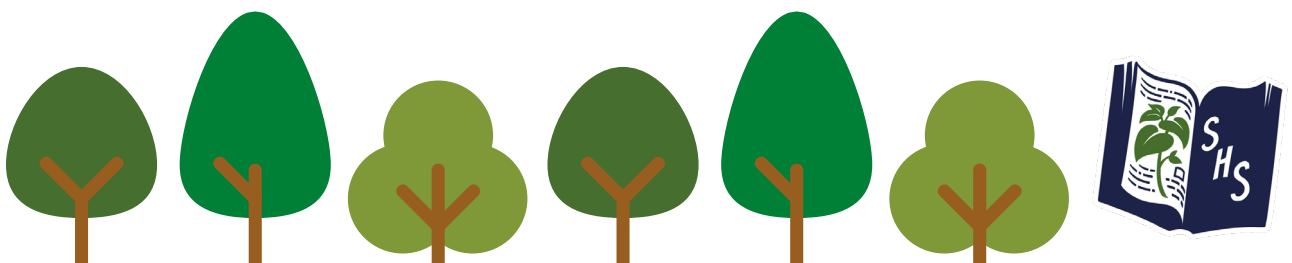
If it makes sense, have a dog or other animal out and about to scare off pests, either directly or with scent marking. It is not foolproof, but it might help.

## **Winter haircuts**

Sometimes nature takes care of our pruning for us, although not necessarily with the same focus and purpose as we have. Wildlife feeding on outer shoots and branch tips can produce a strange looking finished product. When you see shortened and stubby branches that look like they were snipped off, you can make the leap to placing the blame onto Bambi and friends. Other clues will include piles of droppings on the ground nearby or perhaps evidence of where they might have bedded down.

### ***What do you do about it?***

When you see damage unfold in spring, it is generally necessary to take a reactive approach, as the damage is done, and the culprit is unlikely to be sticking around to be caught. For physical damage, such as pruned branches, you will tend to have a bushier plant, but hopefully the plant will recover (if it has not been entirely eaten off). You may need to do some corrective pruning to fix the shape, thin the plant out and get things back on track. If it is a recurring problem, you might need to consider some major physical barriers (high fences) or some form of deterrent.



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