

# Conifer Conundrum

You can probably expect to see some sick or scruffy trees on your travels this summer. Already, people are calling, describing sick and dying trees. It is mostly Douglas fir, but other species of conifer, particularly incense cedar are likely to be involved this year. What's up?

Young trees with their branches and sometimes tops turning brown, then red, and dying. Older trees typically have milder symptoms. This "flaring out" of branches and tops are classic drought symptoms in Douglas fir. The culprit may be late last summer and it's long, dry and very hot period.

Drought injuries do not always show up when they occur, but often manifest themselves the following spring as the weather warms up and the trees start to grow. That seems to have begun with the warm weather of February and March, so we are already seeing these disease symptoms. We have these drought damage events from time to time, most recently in 2013, and again around 2000.

We tend to see drought stress damage on more marginal sites, where wet or shallow soils limit water availability, tree root growth or both. It is also often more common in younger trees (20 years and younger) whose roots may be having trouble keeping up with rapid expansion of their crowns. Douglas fir more adversely affected because of its shallow root system.

Heat and drought can kill trees outright, or more often just put the trees under stress. Stress can then lead to problems with secondary pests, insects or diseases which take advantage of a stressed tree's weakened condition.

Note: Everyone wants to blame the pests, but they are merely a secondary agent that accompanies these severe growing conditions. Currently, we are mostly seeing the direct effects of drought, primarily in Douglas fir. We can probably expect to see drought stress and secondary pest problems emerge among many of our conifers with the oncoming



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summer.

Incense-cedar started looking poor last year, and will likely continue with trees revealing reddish-brown foliage and small branches this year. It is often in the lower parts of the tree.

One likely cause is Incense-cedar rust, a common and familiar foliar disease. It is most recognizable in the spring, when it produces orange gobs of jelly-like goo on the infected fronds. It commonly kills small sprays of leaves and causes a loss of tree vigor in severe cases.

Then there is the less-well-known incense-cedar branch canker which has been recently showing up. It too can cause branch die-back by killing small branches, generally in lower sections of the tree. It seems to hit mature landscape plants. Look for sunken cankers and swellings on branches. Like our other tree species, weather is also likely a contributing factor.

The past few years have been especially tough on many of our tree species. And there's good news and bad news. Bad news: we are starting out especially dry, which could exacerbate harsh growing conditions for our trees.

Good news: these things are cyclical in nature, meaning this too shall pass. But for now, we pretty much just have to grin-an-bear-it and wait for better days in terms of growing conditions for our trees.

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