

Important Winter Landscape Tasks

*Published 1/16/20 – Public domain image from Picryl.com titled “Woman With Snowshoes, 1909”
Photographer: Reuben R. Sallows (1855 - 1937)*

As I'm writing this we have low double digit highs, winds in the 20's, and wind chills steadily below zero. So not the best day to spend even a few minutes going through your yard. So save the following for the next day that's got a little more going for it than today has.

I was reminded of this when looking for some shrubs that we're overwintering in the nursery. The majority of the snow we have on the ground was preceded by some freezing rain. After that fell we've had the weather to melt, then re-freeze the snow multiple times creating heavy, crusty snow. For some of the low-lying shrubs that means some, maybe all, of their branches are covered with the snow. Overall this is a good thing as the layer of snow is protecting the plants. When this isn't such a good thing is when we look at taller shrubs and upright evergreens.



The weight of snow can break and/or deform branches fairly easily. Knee high and taller shrubs with weeping forms can easily accumulate heavy layers of snow on the ends of branches holding the branches much lower to the ground than natural. Examples of shrubs with this growth pattern are bridalwreath spirea or any of the dogwoods. Yes the protection from the desiccating cold is nice, but probably not that necessary. The possible deformation or breakage is not nice and easily outweighs any protection advantages. Shorter trees can be affected like this as well.

Another bush shape that gets bent or deformed easily with heavy snow are tall, narrow, candle-shaped trees and shrubs. Arborvitae are the most affected, partially because of their narrow width and partially because they keep their needles all year. Unfortunately these attributes provides ample spots for snow to accumulate, and if the snow is heavy enough comes branch bending and sometimes breaking. Some of the privets, barberry, ninebarks, and viburnums, although without leaves in the winter, also can be similarly affected.

So once the weather warms a little, or at least when the wind slows a bit, take a brief stroll through your yard looking for snow piles in your weeping and narrow plants that may have branches bending in ways you don't want and remove the snow. In the case of the narrow arborvitae, eliminate future damaging snow accumulations by holding the branches together by wrapping the upper parts of the plant with wide, breathable fabric.

While you're out, take a look up at your trees and see if you can spot any broken branches. Much easier to do before leaves reappear. You can trim them now but it's a little early to do that in my opinion, mainly because we still have a good bit of winter weather to do through. But make a mental note of any branches that are broken and need attention. We'll address these and other trimming needs in a few weeks, well before spring arrives.

Stay warm, stay healthy, stay happy!

Art Smith is a co-owner of East Pierre Landscape and Garden Center, 5400 SD Hwy 34, Pierre