

Plant Health Cues

When do planting problems typically show up?

Time after planting	What you might notice	Possible causes
Days 1–3	Wilting, drooping leaves, drying leaf edges	Root ball drying out, heat, wind, transplant shock
Days 4–14	Persistent wilting, yellowing, leaf drop, browning	Watering issues, root damage, planting stress
Weeks 2–4	Declining foliage, browning needles, stalled growth	Ongoing moisture problems, poor drainage, root stress
Weeks 4–8	Continued decline or dieback	Roots failing to establish, planting too deeply, root damage
2–6 months	Delayed browning, branch dieback, failure to leaf out or establish	Root loss, drought, winter injury
Following spring or summer	Delayed budbreak, weak growth, sudden decline during heat	Incomplete establishment or damage that occurred earlier

These are general patterns, not strict deadlines. Species, weather, planting conditions, and the severity of the problem all affect timing.

What does the timing tell you?

A useful rule of thumb is:

- Within the first few days: Check moisture in the root ball first.
- Within the first two weeks: Investigate watering, planting depth, weather exposure, and root disturbance.
- Several weeks or months later: Look for cumulative moisture stress, drainage issues, root problems, or environmental damage.

Dormant or Dead?

Following winter, you must give your plant adequate opportunity to break winter dormancy. Weather may interfere with normal dormancy patterns. Please remember to give your plants until June 15th to wake from winter dormancy.

During the late fall through the early spring months, deciduous trees/shrubs (most fruit, flowering, and shade) will drop their leaves and go dormant, making them appear as though it is a “stick in a pot.” These plants are entirely healthy and are completing a vital part in their growth cycle but may exhibit browning leaves, sparse leaves, or no leaves at all. Planting during dormancy puts less stress on the plant and allows the plant to focus on root growth, giving it a head start in the spring.

If you receive a plant during this time and would like to ensure the plant is in fact dormant, simply perform a scratch test on the tree. To perform a scratch test, use your thumbnail or a knife and gently scrape a small part of the outer gray-brown bark from a twig or branch. Directly inside the outer bark on healthy trees/shrubs you’ll find a nice green layer, called the cambium. If you continue scratching away the thin green layer, you’ll see the whitish inner wood. The presence of the green layer indicates life in the plant.

Bare root material can ONLY be handled when it is dormant. Take great care to protect bare root plants during this vulnerable time. Upon receipt of bare root trees, it is always best practice to perform a scratch test prior to planting. Failure to produce leaves or buds on the tree is not sufficient determination whether the tree is alive and/or viable as some bare root trees spend a growing season reestablishing their root system before producing leaves.