

This Is Why The North State Paints Trees White, Light Blue In Spring

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, May 17, 2019

Q. I recently moved to Redding and everywhere I go I see tree trunks that look like they've been painted white. I even saw some that were painted a light blue. Can you tell me why folks do this?

A. Painting tree trunks protects them from sunburn that can permanently damage the bark and eventually the trunk of the tree. The damaged bark splits exposing the tree to fungal infection and it also provides an attractive place for tree boring insects to lay eggs that can do further damage to the tree. Injuries to bark can come from both winter sunscald and summer sunburn.

Winter sunscald occurs during late winter when sun-exposed bark is heated during warm days, then frozen during the night. The warming wakes bark cells from dormancy, leaving them susceptible to injury and death from cold. When this happens repeatedly, the bark dies and sloughs off, exposing the wood underneath. Summer sunburn happens during Redding's hot summer months if the young trees don't have enough branches to shade trunks, or the tree becomes water stressed. Typically, this damage occurs on the side of young trees exposed to high light intensities and solar radiation; usually the south to southwest sides.

Young trees or newly planted trees with thin and dark bark, including ornamental and fruit trees, are most susceptible.

To prevent sunscald in the winter months, orchardists wrap trees with white tree wrap or muslin in the late fall, from the base of the tree to the lowest limbs, removing the wrap in early spring. Trunks may also be protected by painting them with tree paint or a 1:1 mixture of water and water-based indoor latex paint. The paint color should be white or another light color that helps reflect the sunlight off the trunk. One should never use acrylic or oil based paint, which could harm or even kill the tree.

A study done by R. Eggert in 1944, some apple and peach trunks were painted white, while others were not. Then temperatures were recorded on the south side of the trees. At no time were the temperatures of the painted trunks more than 10 degrees higher than the air temperature, but the south side of unpainted trunks were often 30 to 50 degrees higher than the air temperature.



A tree with its trunk painted white is protected from sun scald. (Photo: Courtesy Photo/Lincoln County Extension Service)

By protecting the trunks of the young trees you're ensuring that your tree will grow strong and healthy.

If you have a tree that has already suffered damage from either sunscald or sunburn you should clean off any loose bark, cutting back to healthy bark. Then keep the tree well-watered, especially during the hot summer months, and fertilize when needed. This will promote healthy growth and the tree should grow a callus over the wound within a couple of years as long as it doesn't get injured again.

The University of Washington pamphlet titled "Environmental Injury: Sunscald and sunburn on trees" suggests the following: "To aid in callus development, carefully remove any dead or loose bark from the wound. This will eliminate hiding places for insects and improve the

appearance of the wound. By no means should the area ever be treated with a wound dressing or paint. Research has indicated that there is no value in using these materials to bandage a tree wound, and they can make the problem worse.”

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.