

How to Protect your Trees from Cicada Damage

Will they hurt my trees?

They do no serious harm to any healthy mature tree. The greatest damage they do is when female cicadas cut slits in slender twigs at the ends of tree branches and stems of some woody shrubs to create a place to lay their eggs. The twigs affected are between 1/8" and 7/16" in diameter. After the eggs hatch, those twigs may die and break off. A mature tree can spare those twigs and will soon grow new ones. The only trees at risk of significant damage are very young trees that were planted within the last couple of years, or have a trunk diameter of 2 inches or less, and older trees that are unhealthy or stressed.

Which tree species are most susceptible to cicada damage?

Cicadas are not particular and will use many kinds of trees and some shrubs as hosts. However, only very young trees or older trees that are unhealthy or stressed are at any risk. The insects are known to lay eggs in oak, maple, hickory, apple, birch, dogwood, linden, willow, elm, ginkgo, and pear trees. Cicadas also may lay eggs in some shrubs, such as rose, lilac, and forsythia. They tend to avoid conifers such as pine, spruce, and fir. During the last emergence, some of the plants most affected were maples, cherries, ashes, hawthorns, willows, mountain ashes, oaks, pears, roses, privets, poplars, serviceberries, and beeches.

How can I protect a young tree?

First, make sure all your trees, old or young, are well watered and healthy, with no unaddressed disease problems. Healthy trees are always better able to withstand any pests and diseases. For young trees, wrapping their branches in netting will keep cicadas out so they can't lay eggs in twigs, while still allowing air and sunlight to reach the tree. Wrap the tree by early May, after leaves emerge and ideally harden off, and before the insects emerge. Keep the netting on for about six weeks, until the insects have died.

What material should I use to wrap young trees?

Tulle—the nylon or polyester mesh used to make ballerina tutus—works well. It is sold in fabric and some hobby stores. Insect netting is also available at hardware stores and on the internet. The netting needs to have a fine enough mesh to keep out cicadas, with holes 1/4 inch wide or less. The fabric must also be strong enough to last for several weeks on the tree. Don't use netting with holes 1/2 inch wide or more; that won't stop a cicada.

Any tips for wrapping young trees and shrubs?

Wrap the entire branching area of the tree. It will likely take at least several yards of fabric. Where sheets of fabric meet, overlap the edges, tuck them under once or twice, and secure the roll with binder clips, clothespins, or staples. Below the branches, gather the netting around the trunk or the base of the shrub and clip it, staple it or tie it with twine. Make sure there is no gap more than 1/4 inch. Do not tie anything around the trunk so tightly that it damages the bark. Netting must stay on the tree for about six weeks, beginning in late April or early May. Be sure to remove the netting and any string or rope tied around the trunk once the cicadas have died.

This, plus more information can be found at www.mortonarb.org