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NEWS

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Yellowing Pine Needles Normal in Autumn

GOLDEN, Colo. – Although thousands of evergreen trees in the foothills west of Denver are beginning to display dying yellow or brown needles, many are simply going through a natural shedding process – and are not infested by bark beetles or tree disease.

“Needle loss in the fall is normal for many conifers. Even though these trees are called evergreens, they do not retain every needle indefinitely,” said Lawton Grinter, forester with the Colorado State Forest Service Golden District. “Many pines retain three to five years worth of needles and drop any needles that are older than that.”

Front Range evergreens shed the older, interior needles as part of an annual growth cycle. Needles on the lower portion of the crowns or closest to the trunk are most commonly shed, but trees stressed due to drought or root damage may shed more needles to keep the tree in balance with its root system. Soon-to-be shed needles typically turn yellow first, then a reddish-brown color before dropping off.

In the CSFS Golden District, which includes Jefferson, Clear Creek and northeast Park counties, ponderosa, lodgepole and Austrian pine are the tree species that commonly shed needles from September through December.

Evergreen trees that shed fall needles have a different appearance than trees infested by bark beetles. The needles on a beetle-infested tree typically change color throughout the entire tree, initially starting with an off-shade of green and turning to reddish-orange by the following summer. In addition to changing needle color, bark beetle-infested trees will show other signs of attack, such as fine sawdust at the base of the tree.

Seasonal discoloration and loss of pine needles frequently is called “needle cast,” but the term actually refers to a fungal disease of spruce and fir trees.

For more information about tree and forest health, contact the CSFS Golden District at 303-279-9757 or visit csfs.colostate.edu.

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