

Evergreen Needle Drop

“Help! What is wrong with my cedar (or pine or fir)?! It’s dropping its needles!”

Most frequently, the answer is “Nothing.” This is a natural condition.

Every fall and especially after exceptionally dry summers, some evergreen trees, such as the western red cedar, experience what appears to be an alarming death of leaves or needles. Pines and other conifers suffer a similar, if less dramatic, fate.


What is happening? Despite their name, evergreen needles do not stay green forever. Older, inner leaves (needles) discolor and drop off after one or more years. Some plants shed their leaves slowly over the season; others lose large numbers in the fall.

What you can do

Here are a few things to help you determine if your tree’s needle drop is a natural loss or if there is a problem of concern.

- Observe the timing of leaf drop. Most conifers and evergreens will have their most significant leaf drop in the fall. Excessive leaf shedding in

the spring or summer months may indicate a problem.

- Check the pattern of leaf drop. Healthy trees drop only older leaves, those closest to the trunk away from the tip of a branch. If a whole side is dropping leaves or whole branches are turning brown, the plant may be suffering from a pest, disease or cultural problem.
- Check the color of the newest leaves at the tips of branches. If the tips of needles or leaves are brown, the plant is drought stressed; this may explain the leaf drop.
- If you are unsure about a plant’s health, give In Harmony a call. Our technicians are trained to recognize natural needle drop and distinguish it from more alarming plant problems. 

Reference

Landscape Plant Problems: A Pictorial Diagnostic Manual. Byther, R.S., Foss, C.R., Antonelli, A.L., Maleike, R.R., and Bobbitt, V.M. Washington State University Cooperative Extension, 2000.

