“Sleepy Trees”

By: Pam Bergstrom, Lower Elkhorn Natural Resources District Forester

We’ve all been in this situation where it is early morning, the sun is out, the alarm clock is going off letting us know that our slumber is over and a new day is starting, time to get up. But wait! The sun is playing games with us and deceiving us because it may look warm, but it sure is not warm when you stick one of your toes out from under the covers. You snuggle back under the blankets thinking that a few more minutes under the warm sanctuary of the blankets will insure that the sun does its duty with warming up the rest of the environment.

Humans go through this problem of not wanting to get out of bed when the weather is rather cool so it shouldn’t surprise us that trees and shrubs would do the same thing, right? Over the past few days residents across northeast Nebraska have been asking why some tree and shrub species like honey locust, willow, catalpa, and even some of the viburnums have not been fully leafing out yet. Is a disease or insect problem going around? Or is another invisible foe at work here?

In most cases, the answer is the weather has been on the cool side as of late and many of the trees, shrubs, and even some of the flowers just have not been breaking full bud. If this is happening to your trees, how can you tell if your tree is just, for lack of a better phrase, ‘sleeping in this spring’ rather than having ‘one root in the grave’? Well, let me give you a few simple exercises to see if your tree is still surviving or if it is time to throw in the mulch.

The first exercise is to touch them very gently to see if those buds are moist and plushy to the touch or if they are hard and almost crumble at the slightest touch. Those buds that are still moist and plushy have a better chance are being viable than those that are hard and crumble to the touch. The second exercise is to take several twigs or branches and slowly bend them from side to side to see if

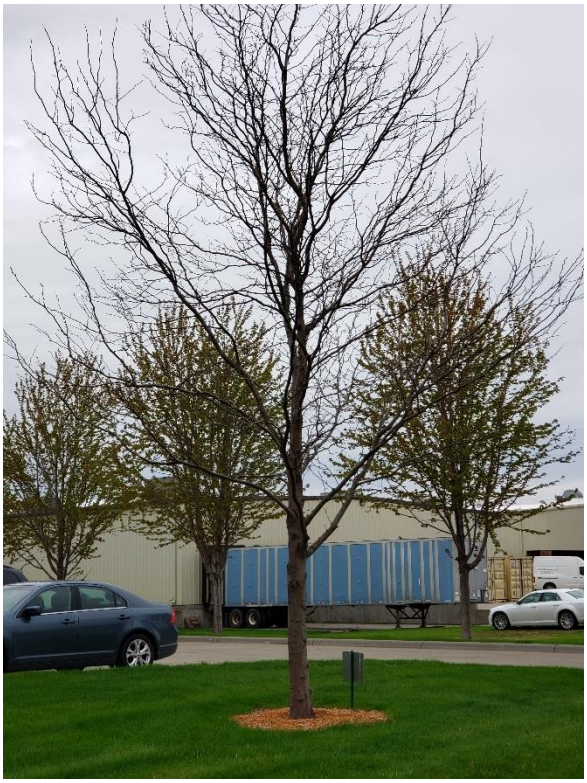
they are able to bend without breaking and the key is not to get to wild that you don't realize your own strength and start to break limbs, especially those that are healthy. When a limb is dead, you shouldn't have to flex it to far back for it to break. The final exercise is to take your finger nail or your pocket knife and gently peel back some of the bark off the twig or branch that you are questioning if it is alive or dead. If below the peel you see a lime green color the twig or branch is still alive, but if you see a brown or black color and have a hard time make the peel in the first place then you have a dead branch.

So, what do you do if your branches are still green and alive? The best thing to do is to wait and make sure the soil around the tree is moist by digging about 6 – 8 inches down and if it is wet you don't have to worry about watering but if it dry then turn on some water and give the tree a long soak for a good hour or so to make sure the water goes deep into the sub soils and reaches the deep roots. Also make sure you have ground up wood mulch around the tree to keep that soil moist.

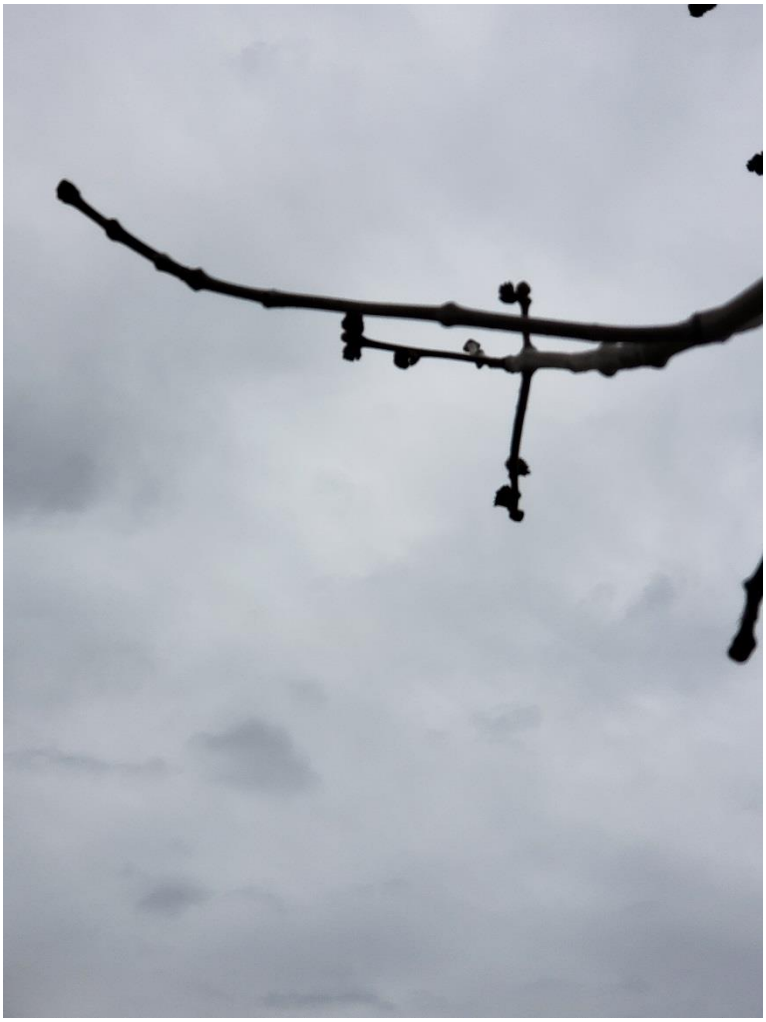
If the branch is dead but the rest of the tree is alive, the best thing to do is to prune the dead tree off so the tree can properly heal. If you are not comfortable doing the pruning yourself, contact a certified arborist to come out and do the pruning for you. Now the next question you are going to ask is probably about fertilizing and the simple answer is no, do not fertilize. The complex answer is if you have a soil sample taken and they can identify what nutrients you are lacking, you can come up with your own special formulated fertilize just for your tree and soils, but if you have planted a tree that is native or naturalized for this area, you should not have to worry about fertilizing your trees or shrubs. Again, the best thing to do is make sure the soils around the tree are moist and put down ground up wood mulch around the tree to keep the soil moist and to act as a natural fertilizer to keep organic matter in the soil.

The cause of this dead limb could be from the rapid changes in temperature we have been having this spring and the fact that the sudden changes in the temperature could have caused the sap in

the trees to freeze and stop flow to some limbs all together. When in doubt, talk with your local county extension agent, certified arborist, or local forester.



A Honey Locust in the front yard of the Lower Elkhorn NRD Office. Notice that not a single leaf has emerged yet, but it is still alive! Notice that the Freeman Maples in the background are leafing out.



No leaves on this Silver Maple . . . YET!

A close-up of the Honey Locust branch. Notice that some of the buds are starting to swell. With some warmer weather, they (the leaf buds) should break!

More bare branches waiting to leaf out!