

Proper Care for Birch Trees

by Jeffrey P. Hagfors, Certified Arborist WI-0181A



All trees respond to the environment that they live in. Their long-term health is influenced by changes in the availability of soil moisture, the condition of the soil, the availability of nutrients and pressures from insect and disease. Birch trees are one of the most sensitive trees in our urban forest and they respond unfavorably to the urban environment. Native stands of birch trees are found in cool, moist sites with good drainage. When we plant them in our yards, the sun strikes the ground under the tree and overheats the soil. West and south exposures can be especially difficult for growing birches. Additionally, the turf greedily out-competes the birch for nutrients and water. Without proper care, urban birch trees will not grow to their fullest potentials.

Providing proper care for your birch trees begins with **watering**. During the summer months, established birch trees will require one inch of rainfall per week. Whether this moisture falls from the clouds or from your sprinkler, your birch will need it. Always check before irrigating. Stick your fingers into the soil. If you can roll or form the soil into a ribbon or ball, soil moisture is adequate. Too much water can be harmful to birch trees, too.

Proper use of natural, organic **mulch** is another key and essential ingredient needed for the long-term health of birch trees. Maintain a generous bed of mulch under your birch tree. Keep it at a depth of 2-3 inches; be careful not to pile it against the trunk. Mulch has multiple benefits. As mulch decomposes, it builds organic material in the soil.

This organic matter, in turn, begins to rebuild the soil structure, improve its nutrient-holding capacity and increase soil aeration. Proper mulching also preserves soil moisture, increases rooting, moderates temperature extremes and protects the thin bark of birch trees from damage caused by lawn mowers and string-trimmers. Help your birch even more by planting low-growing shrubs and perennials in the mulch under the canopy to help shade the root system.

Regular **fertilization** of birch trees is important to maintaining their health. Maintaining proper nutrient levels promotes plant vigor, the first line of defense against the pressures of insects and diseases. Many birch trees respond to low fertility with small, stunted leaves and poor performance. Additionally, chlorosis, the yellowing of leaves, indicates a lack of one or more of the micronutrients that birch trees need to maintain a high level of vigor.

Birch trees need to be protected from insect attacks. The **bronze birch borer** will quickly take advantage of a white birch that is in less than perfect health. Too little or too much water, poor soil conditions, low vigor and damage from **birch leafminer** will predispose a white birch to bronze birch borer attack. Annual soil injections of Merit insecticide will control birch leafminer and deter the entry of bronze birch borer. If bronze birch borer is already in the tree, a trunk injection of Bidrin insecticide may be needed to eliminate them.

Birch trees are common in the landscape but caring for them is anything but routine. Each individual is different. Trust the individual care and treatment for your birch trees to your experienced Wachtel Certified Arborist.



A healthy birch can add a lot to a landscape.