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Trees need extra TLC during drought

After four years of drought, trees across the state and especially around Santa Clara County are stressed.

Drought-stressed trees haven't had enough water to allow them to remain healthy, and so they are more susceptible to diseases and insect infestations, particularly by the native bark beetle. The U.S. Forest Service estimates 29.1 million trees in forests throughout California have been lost due to the drought. That's up from 3.3 million killed in 2014.

The significant increase in dead or dying trees led Governor Brown to declare a state of emergency to make it easier for agencies to remove trees that pose a hazard to people or property. "California is facing the worst epidemic of tree mortality in its modern history," said Governor Brown in a letter to U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack.

The water district is identifying more dead and dying trees on our rights of way. We have removed more than 100 trees on our property this year – far more than in years past. In addition to removing dead or dying trees, which could potentially pose a hazard to life and property, our crews have also been making an extra effort to keep our waterways clear of trees and branches that could impede the flow of water during storms.

If you see a downed tree, report it to us using our Access Valley Water portal on our web page (www.valleywater.org), the Access Valley Water app or by calling our maintenance line at (408) 630-2378. If it's during a storm, call our flood hotline at (408) 630-2650.

We are mapping dead and hazardous trees on our 10,802 acres of property in response to public requests and reports from field staff, as we encounter them. For hazard trees—those that pose a hazard to property or people if they lose branches or fall—we work with the state on removal and sometimes replacement with native trees.

The water district will continue to prioritize inspections of reported dead or dying trees. Those that have a high likelihood of hitting a person or damaging property if they fall are given the highest priority for removal. Those that pose no obvious risk are added to our list of trees to monitor.

We also suggest you do an assessment of any trees on your property. While we have asked people to cut back on watering their lawns or to replace their lawns altogether, we ask that you

continue to maintain your trees. Besides contributing to the beauty of an area, trees keep land cooler, provide shade, habitat and food for wildlife, and help keep the air clean.

As we enter the winter season, storms and winds can damage or knock over weak trees, so make sure yours are strong. Trim dead branches, and if possible, have the health of your trees checked by a certified arborist.

Be sure to water them wisely, too. Water trees around the “drip line,” the outer edge of the branches to help the tree’s smaller roots access water. Trees should not be watered at the base of the trunk or the tree runs the chance of developing root rot. Water slowly and deeply rather than with overhead sprinklers. The soil should be moist to about 12 to 18 inches deep.

Water mature trees once a month or every other month, and young trees weekly or every other week. Check the soil so you don’t over-or underwater. If you’re planting trees, remember that native trees are better adapted to withstand drought and are a good investment for long-term viability.

For more information on caring for your trees, visit www.canopy.org or www.ourcityforest.org/tree-care/#tree-care-learn.

Submitted on behalf of the Santa Clara Valley Water District. For further information, contact your elected district representative, Board Chair Gary Kremen, at gkremen@valleywater.org