1980

Shelterbelts and Windbreaks: Fixing Shrub Rows

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Recommended Citation
Shelterbelts and windbreaks:

Fixing shrub rows

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South Dakota State University
U.S. Department of Agriculture
The only weak spot in many South Dakota shelterbelts/windbreaks (S/W) is a thin or totally missing shrub row(s). It’s not a problem you can ignore just because the trees look good. A weak shrub row causes snowdrifts to the lee of the S/W. Those drifts should be inside the planting, to be used as moisture for the trees in the next growing season. Little wintertime snow storage kills a planting eventually.

Every tree planting should have at least two shrub rows—one on the windward side and one on the leeward.

Inspect the shrub row

1. Small shrubs (sandcherry and skunkbush sumac) should be about 3 feet apart. Larger shrubs (lilac, plum, or juniper) should be about 4 feet apart.
2. Shrubs should have branches and foliage at ground level as well as at the top.
3. At least 90% of each plant should be living.
4. There should be very little vegetation beneath the plants.

What to do if . . .

. . . all shrubs are present, but sparsely foliaged and some dead branches show.

Remedy

Shear off the shrubs to a 6- to 12-inch height. Hollow or small stemmed plants like honeysuckle can be rapidly sheared with a power sickle mower. Thick stemmed shrub species like caragana (Siberian peashrub) will require a powered circular saw.

Situation: Some shrub species weaken or become "leggy" faster than others. They become sparsely foliaged and allow wind and snow to filter through.

Remedy: Cut the shrubs off to a height of 6 to 12 inches. They will resprout and come back thicker than before.
Situation: No shrub rows exist.

Remedy:
- Plant one or two rows. Or cut down the outside tree rows and let the stumps sprout and function as shrub rows. If the trees are farther than 8 feet apart, plant shrubs in between.

Fact sheets discussing shelterbelt/windbreak problems and renovation procedures are:
- FS 746, Stop livestock grazing in shelterbelts
- FS 749, Plugging up the holes (trees)
- FS 750, Fixing shrub rows
- FS 751, Getting rid of the grass

No brand name endorsement is implied.

... some shrubs are gone; the live ones show some dead branches. They are open at the bottom with vegetation on the ground surface.

Remedy
- Shear off the shrubs in poor vigor to a 6- to 12-inch height. Hand plant new shrubs in the vacant areas, spacing them about 2 feet apart.
- Next fall, apply Simazine or Casoron in a 3- to 4-foot-wide band for the entire length of the renovated row. (Use half rates of chemicals when lilac is being treated.)

... long stretches of the shrub row are missing.

Remedy
- If space allows, plant at least one new shrub row (two is better) at least 20 feet from the nearest tree row. Work up the area one year before planting; use snow fence or some other method to trap snow on the tilled area (this gives your new shrubs some moisture to start with).

... shrub row either was not planted originally or died out many years ago.

Remedy
- There are two things you can do. Either plant one or two rows of shrubs, or, if the planting is composed of 7 to 10 complete rows of tall trees (Siberian elm) or medium trees (Russian olive), cut back the two windward rows. The stumps will resprout and function as a shrub row.

... shrub row is overtopped and suppressed by an adjacent tree row.

Remedy
- If space allows, plant one or two rows of shrubs outside the influence of the tree row.
- Or cut down the offending trees. Treat stumps with a mixture of 1 part 2,4-D and 3 parts fuel oil.