

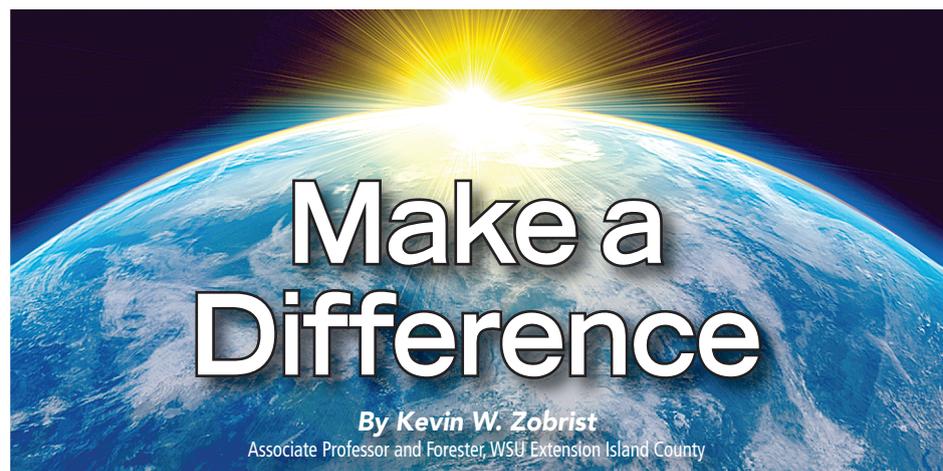
Look Who's Growing!

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KEEP WHIDBEY FORESTS RESILIENT IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

Whidbey Island's forests are part of what makes it such a special place. With a range of wet and dry conditions along the length of the island, Whidbey's forests have a lot of diversity you don't find on the mainland, with thriving communities of western white pine, lodgepole pine, Pacific yew, madrone, grand fir, and oak complementing the Douglas fir, western hemlock, red alder, and western red cedar that typify most of the Puget Sound Area.

These days, though, Whidbey's forests could use a bit of help. You don't have to look far to spot new instances of dead trees, which have proliferated especially over the past year. We're seeing increased mortality across many species. Western red cedar have been particularly hard-hit, with western hemlocks also having a fairly rough time. Repeated summers of record heat and drought are taking their toll, with trees succumbing to cumulative stress.

Water stress is killing many trees in and of itself. It also stresses trees to the point of being vulnerable to insects and diseases they would normally hold their own against. This does not indicate an insect and disease problem per se, but rather it's a water issue, with insects and diseases acting as opportunistic secondary agents along for the ride.

In some cases, it's not the record summer heat and drought, but rather the record winter rains wreaking havoc. Hemlocks have been suffering from a new foliar disease called *Rhizoctonia*. This fungal pathogen causes the trees to lose their needles from the inside out and the bottom up. It is thought the excessive wet conditions are facilitating this damage. Record drought and record rain don't cancel each other out; rather they pose a double-whammy for our trees.

What can you do? The first thing is not to panic. Be concerned? Yes. Panic? No. These problems developed over time, and the solutions also need to develop over time. There are no quick fixes, and products are not the answer. Rather, the solution lies in building long-term resilience, which is done through maintaining tree vigor and diversity.

When it comes to tree vigor, there are three key principles to keep in mind.

The first is right tree, right site. Make sure the tree species is well-matched to the soil type and environmental conditions. Many trees which may have held their own on a marginal site during normal climatic conditions can no longer cut it as we shift to hotter and drier conditions. Species more drought-tolerant are needed, especially on dry, gravelly soils.

The second principle is density management. Trees are good, but more is not always better. The fewer trees competing for sunlight and limited water, the more each tree gets. Many of Whidbey's forests are characterized by overstocking. Driving up Highway 525 you can see many examples of tall, spindly trees crammed together in dark, dense stands. We can't control stress from the weather, but we can control the stress from competition. If your trees are too dense, it is important to get professional guidance about how to thin the right trees. Which specific trees you take and leave make all the difference in a good outcome vs. a bad one.

The third principle is to make sure to limit

barriers to your trees getting water. Grass is particularly notorious for robbing trees of water. Grass should be pulled back beyond the dripline of the tree and replaced with three to four inches of a good mulch, like arborist chips (just don't pile the mulch up against the tree itself).

In terms of diversity, it's simply a matter of not putting all your eggs in one basket. Different tree species have different tolerances, and insects and diseases only affect certain species. Diversity not only adds resilience, it also adds beauty and biodiversity.

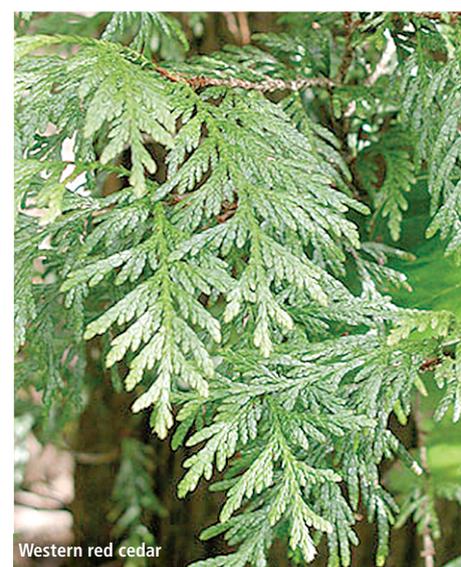
The best way to start building resilience is to create a stewardship plan for your property. WSU Extension offers classes and resources to help property owners identify problems and opportunities and develop their own customized stewardship plan. Visit the WSU Extension Forestry website at <http://forestry.wsu.edu/nps/> for details of available programs and resources and to sign up for our award-winning newsletter for property owners.

Other agencies also provide resources. The Washington Department of Natural Resources can provide technical support for larger (>10 acres) properties at <https://bit.ly/2UQ6D9Q>. The Whidbey Island Conservation District has an annual native tree and plant sale and can help you select appropriate species for your site at www.whidbeycd.org/wicid-storefront.html. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service can help you find cost-share funding to undertake cost-prohibitive conservation measures on your property at www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/wa/home/.

A final thing we all can do is change our expectations and learn to tolerate some of the changes on the landscape. Dead trees aren't all bad. In fact, 40-percent of our wildlife species rely on standing dead trees (snags) and downed logs. A dead tree may not be so much of a loss of a tree as a gain of an important wildlife feature. It's all about perspective and long-term planning.



Western hemlock



Western red cedar



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