

Laura Phillips  
District Extension Agent, Horticulture

### **Act Now to Control Volunteer Trees**

While we tend to focus on Christmas trees this time of year, there are another kind of tree we should think about in December: volunteer trees. Volunteer trees are saplings that appear on their own from seeds without human help. Volunteer trees are a vital part of our landscape, but if they are in your yard, garden, or pastures, they can be a nuisance. If the volunteer tree is desirable but in the wrong place, you can wait and transplant it in the spring. Other volunteer trees, can be cut down and treated to remove them from the landscape. December and January are a surprisingly good time to treat for these trees.

The first step to control volunteer trees is to cut them down. Some trees, like eastern redcedar, will not resprout after being cut. Many common trees, however, including oak, maple, elm, ash, hackberry, cottonwood, and sycamore, will resprout after cut if you do not dig out the roots or treat the stump with an herbicide.

There is a common misconception that trees must be growing for herbicides to work. It is true that without any leaves, a foliar herbicide spray will not do any good. Applying herbicide to a cut stump, however, can kill the trees at any stage of growth. Often, the winter is a convenient time to remove volunteer trees, and the absence of leaves and greenery helps you find and treat small trees.

Glyphosate (found in Roundup) and Triclopyr, are the most common active ingredients in stump treatment herbicides for homeowners. Whereas you usually use a diluted herbicide for foliar spray, stump treatments generally use an undiluted or lightly diluted herbicide. Before purchasing the herbicide, make sure the label says that it can be used for stump treatment. Make sure to read all instructions on the label and wear all the necessary protective equipment.

The goal is for the tree to absorb the herbicide and transport it to the roots. To do this, we need to apply the treatment in a ring on the outer edge of the stump immediately after cutting it. Trees have small veins in the outer rings that transport food and water, known as the phloem and xylem. Apply the herbicide on the outer edge of the stump to get the herbicide into the tree's veins. We recommend applying the herbicide immediately after cutting the tree, as the veins, when exposed to air, will start to close off and won't absorb the herbicide. These stump treatments should only be applied when temperatures are above freezing, or the herbicide may freeze on the stump instead of moving down into the roots.

While these stump treatments are great for getting rid of volunteer trees, they should not be used on suckers. Suckers are small shoots that appear at the base of a tree. If an herbicide is applied to a sucker, it will transport the herbicide to the roots of the main tree, and you may damage or kill your tree.

If you are having trouble with volunteer trees in your yard or garden and need more guidance, feel free to reach out to your local extension office for more information.