



DIGGIN’ IT
BY PHAIDRA YUNKER
Cracking up

If you’ve been anywhere near a TV, radio or social feed during the latest Arctic blast, you’ve probably heard reports about “exploding trees.” It’s the kind of headline that makes you picture your backyard turning into a lumber-themed fireworks show. Fortunately, the truth is far less apocalyptic, though still dramatic enough to earn a little fanfare.

As temperatures plunged across the Upper Midwest, people started hearing sharp, echoing cracks in the early morning hours. Suddenly, “exploding trees” became the winter’s most unintentionally hilarious buzzword. What’s really happening isn’t an explosion at all. It’s a natural reaction to extreme cold, one that trees have been dealing with for millions of years, long before the news cycle discovered them.

Those startling sounds are what arborists call frost cracks, though “crack” hardly captures the gunshot-like report that can ricochet through the river bottoms. Frost cracks happen when temperatures plummet quickly. As the air temperature drops, the outer bark cools and contracts faster than the inner wood. Meanwhile, the sap inside the tree begins to freeze and expand. The result is a tug-of-war of pressure inside the trunk. When the tension becomes too much, the bark splits with a dramatic pop. Think of it like a soda can exploding in your freezer.

Despite the theatrics, most trees handle frost cracks with surprising grace. The split usually runs vertically along the trunk and, while it may look alarming, many trees compartmentalize the damage and continue growing as if nothing happened. Gardeners often worry that a frost crack means a tree is doomed, but in most cases, it’s more like a torn jacket seam. Unsightly, yes, but not a fatal wardrobe malfunction.

It’s worth keeping an eye on any tree that cracks loudly enough to make you spill your morning coffee. Repeated cracking or deep splits can weaken the trunk over time, especially in trees already stressed by drought, pests or age. If you notice a crack that seems to widen or ooze sap in warmer weather, it may be worth consulting an arborist.

Now, because this topic has been making the rounds, I’ve already heard a few stories about people rushing outside with blankets, bubble wrap or whatever they can find to “protect” their trees from exploding. Let me save you the trouble: wrapping your tree trunks to prevent frost cracks is useless.

Tree wraps can help with sunscald, and they can deter rabbits from chewing bark, but they won’t stop the physics of freezing sap. The forces that cause a frost crack come from within the tree, not from outside. No amount of wrapping, padding or winter accessorizing will change that.

The good news is that trees have spent millions of years evolving strategies to survive cold climates, and frost cracks are just one of the many quirks that come

with those adaptations.

One of their most impressive tricks is supercooling, a process in which cells lower the freezing point of their internal fluids. By concentrating sugars and other solutes, trees can keep water inside their cells from freezing even when temperatures dip below 32°F. It’s the botanical equivalent of adding antifreeze to your car, except trees figured it out long before we did.

Another adaptation is deep dormancy, a kind of hibernation. As days shorten and temperatures drop, trees gradually shut down growth processes, redirect energy and harden their tissues. This dormancy helps them ride out winter without wasting resources.

Then there’s structural adaptation. Trees in cold climates tend to have denser wood, narrower vessels and tighter cellular structures. These features reduce the risk of ice forming inside the tree’s “plumbing” system. Some species, like birch and aspen, have flexible bark that can expand and contract more easily, making them less prone to cracking. Others, like oaks, rely on thick, rugged bark that insulates the inner wood from rapid temperature swings.

Even the shape of a tree can be an adaptation. Conifers, with their classic triangular silhouette, shed snow efficiently so branches don’t snap under the weight. Their needles are coated in waxy cuticles that reduce moisture loss and resist freezing.

Of course, no evolutionary strategy is perfect. When temperatures drop fast enough (especially below- 20°F), even the hardiest trees can’t keep up with the physics of freezing water. That’s when the frost cracks happen.

For gardeners, the best way to help trees weather winter is surprisingly simple: keep them healthy. A well-watered tree going into fall is less likely to suffer stress cracks. Mulching around the base helps regulate soil temperature and moisture. Avoid pruning late in the season, since fresh cuts can make trees more vulnerable to cold damage. And resist the urge to “fix” a frost crack with sealant! Trees are far better at healing themselves than we are at helping them.

So the next time you hear a mysterious bang on a frigid morning, don’t assume your backyard is under siege. More likely, one of your trees is just voicing its opinion about the weather. Honestly, who can blame it? Winter in North Dakota has a way of making all of us crack up a little.

Have plant questions? I’ve got answers. Email your questions or photos to digginit@nordaknorth.com, or stop by The Leader-News office with a photo or sample.

Phaidra Yunker is a Master Gardener and a certified horticulturist with over a decade of experience in the horticultural industry. She serves as Vice President of the City of Washburn Forestry Board.

BACK IN THE DAY
Underwood

COMPILED BY SHELLY WALLACE
from the Files of the Central McLean News Journal

20 years ago, Feb. 2006
The sale of First Security Bank to Davis Bankshares also included the sale of the Underwood Insurance Agency to John E. Davis Jr., Hannelore Davis and Richard Davis.

At 7:26 p.m., this past Saturday, Sgt. Gordon Malaterre with the McLean County Sheriff’s Department stopped a vehicle for following too closely to another vehicle on U.S. Highway 83. The driver did not have a license, but produced a Mexican I.D. The driver did not have a green card and spoke limited English. By 1 a.m., Sunday, three illegal aliens were handed over to Border Patrol.

The first order of business for the Underwood City Commission involved establishing an Underwood Housing Authority.

Kevin and Cindy Olson’s son Bryce had back surgery Jan. 12, which involved anterior/posterior spinal fusion with instrumentation and bone grafting at Gillette Children’s Hospital in St. Paul, Minn. It has been a long haul for Bryce, but less than a month after surgery, he continues to get stronger and has even attended school for a short time.

The Underwood Area Economic Development Corporation has been working for some time on establishing a housing development around Westridge Golf Course. Three different drawings were submitted by Henry Schneider of Toman Engineering for review by the Underwood City Commission at the Monday night meeting. There are two phases to his original plan, and he discussed things that need to be addressed to get the project going.

30 years ago, Feb. 1996
District 8 Republicans cast a unanimous ballot to endorse the team of Layton Freborg, Albert (Mick) Grosz and Jeff Delzer as their candidates for the state legislature at the Lincoln Day Dinner Saturday in Underwood.

Matthew Potter was selected to participate in the all-state band. He is the son of David and Kirsten Potter, Cole-harbor.

Mavis Leidholm of Underwood captured first place in the women’s 40 and over age group of the annual Heart-breaker Run held in Mandan.

40 years ago, Feb. 1986
Les Korgel of Garrison, assistant vice-president of Garrison State Bank, has been appointed McLean County Treasurer to succeed Rodney Slagg, who is retiring May 1.

A winter story hour started at the Underwood Public Library with 18 preschool children enrolled. Volunteer mothers were in charge.

The family of Mike Gertz gathered at Prairieview Nursing Home to join him in observing his 95th birthday.

Our weather has been a little on the cold side, but no wind or snow.

50 years ago, Feb. 1976
Three cars belonging to the Soo Line Railroad left the tracks north of the Snake Creek Pumping Station Wednesday evening, Feb. 4, leaving four crew members shaken. Doug Kimmer, speaking for the railroad, said the cause of the accident is undetermined, but an investigation is being conducted into the cause. Three cars, a plow, engine and caboose left the track.

The Riverdale Stitch and Sew 4-H Club has made a valentine box for the Prairieview Nursing Home and invites anyone who would like to give valentines to the residents to put them in the valentine box the week of Feb. 9-14.

Farmers around the county gathered last week in Garrison, where delegates discussed resolutions and plans for action in an effort to raise the price for their grain. Russ Coutts, manager of Coast Trading, and Bob Boatz of Farmers Elevator agreed that farmers are holding grain back from the market.

The Sakakawea Roughrider Snowmobile Club of Riverdale held its 2nd annual marathon ride for the State School of Grafton on Jan. 31. Fifty-six machines and riders participated in the 85-mile run from Pick City to Stanton, Hensler, Washburn, Underwood and Riverdale, raising \$1,517.

Underwood’s Comets squeezed past Wilton in a 75-73 victory Friday night. Mark Milkey led the Comets in scoring with 37 points, followed by Wes Lutz with 20 points; Mike Milkey had six points, Lee Scheer five points, Tim Leidholm, four points and Dean Cottingham put in three points.

60 years ago, Feb. 1966
Congratulations are in order for Coach Dave Binkley and the Underwood Meteors, grade basketball team, for winning the county tournament at Butte Saturday night. They won in two close games, over Max 29-28 and over Riverdale 45-44. Terry Burrowes, Otho Snyder, Dick Bader, Bobby Hepper, Lee Johnson, Greg Johnson, David Granlie, Oren Scheer, Jimmy Senger, Jay Diede were on the team. Student manager is Ed Mertz.

Mrs. Arlette Goehring has been appointed by the board of directors of the North Dakota Easter Seal Society to be the executive director for North Dakota.

Coach Dick Belisle’s Comets improved their Missouri Basin Conference record Friday night as they turned back the Garrison Troopers 57-49.

Members of the Underwood Fire Department and their wives, former members and city officials were entertained

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P.O. Box 573, Underwood, ND 58576 • 701-462-8126 • USPS #647540
email centralmclean@nordaknorth.com • website nordaknorth.com
Ethyn Williams-Calvert..... Editor
Shelly Wallace..... Sales Representative
Jackie Kohler..... Production

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Deadlines
3 p.m. Monday – classifieds
10 a.m. Tuesday – advertisements, public notices, news and area announcements