

What to Do When Spruces Die by Kathleen Sayce

Hotter and drier summers are hard on Sitka spruce trees. 2018 was particularly dry, and the result is that many spruces are dying. What should a concerned land owner do?

If the dying tree endangers buildings or infrastructure, take it down. Otherwise, leave it to become a snag, providing habitat for numerous insects, fungi, animals and birds.

If all your spruces die, what should you plant in their place? There are several conifers to choose from, all native to the West: Western Red Cedar, Douglas-fir, and Coast Redwood are all long-lived conifers that are more drought tolerant than Sitka spruce.

If you plant Douglas-fir, look for coastal trees, not the fast-growing clones used by the timber industry. Coastal Douglas-fir is more resistant to Swiss needle cast. These trees take up about as much room as spruce when mature (60-100 years). Give these trees a minimum of 30 feet spacing, 50 is better.

If you have 50 to 100 feet in all directions for one large tree, think about planting a Monterey Cypress or Giant Sequoia. Both can grow very large. We have a number of large Monterey Cypress in our communities, planted almost a century ago when spruces last died en masse.

Sitka spruces are not gone. There are more seedlings this year than usual; many trees also have heavy cone sets ripening. There will be more spruce seedlings next year.