Many woody landscape plants are unable to tolerate wet growing sites. When water stands over the roots or when the soil becomes saturated, the oxygen concentration in the soil decreases. Without sufficient oxygen, roots will “suffocate.” Once roots are damaged, the plant declines and can eventually die. This condition is known as “wet feet.”

Sensitive species planted in poorly drained soils, in low areas, or near a downspout are vulnerable to wet feet. Soil around the foundation of buildings often consists of poorly drained clay subsoil which was removed during construction and spread out over the landscape. Overwatering can also lead to wet feet problems.

Wet soil conditions may also promote root rot diseases caused by fungus-like organisms, such as Phytophthora or Pythium. Root and collar rot diseases can cause the decline of plants.

Affected plants may show symptoms of gradual decline over several months or years. Typical above-ground symptoms include yellowing, wilt, browning of the foliage, and dieback of twigs and branches. The deeper roots turn brown and die, while the roots close to the surface may remain alive.

**Management**

Avoid planting sensitive species in poorly drained sites. Many conifers, such as hemlock, Taxus and white pine, are easily damaged. Sugar maples and certain oaks do not tolerate wet conditions. Rhododendrons and azaleas are also sensitive to wet soils and the root rot diseases promoted by excess moisture.

Reroute downspouts so that rain water does not drain near trees or shrubs. Drain
extenders may also be purchased; these allow water to flow beyond and away from foundation plantings.

When planting into soils with poor internal soil drainage is unavoidable, soils can be amended with organic matter. Planting in a raised bed is another alternative. In such cases, it is still advisable to use species which are able to tolerate periodic wet conditions. Tolerant woody plants include the following trees: red maples, river birch, bald cypress, American larch, London plane tree and sweet gum; and the following shrubs: arrowwood, buttonbush, Carolina allspice, red chokeberry, shrubby cinquefoil, golden twig dogwood, red osier dogwood, snowberry and winterberry.

(Revised 12-04)