

# Winter 2026

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Winter 2026 provided bountiful, fluffy snow which is fantastic for skiers and snowmobilers. As gardeners, we know there may be a suite of burrowing mammals causing havoc beneath that white blanket or larger animals causing trouble above ground.

New Hampshire gardens remain vulnerable under snow cover. Shrubs, perennials, and ornamental seedlings lie dormant, but roots and lower stems can be tempting food sources for hungry wildlife. Snow cover provides insulation, allowing small mammals to move undetected.

## Winter culprits:

Voles (also known as meadow mice) are small rodents that build networks of shallow tunnels under the snow. They feed on roots, bulbs, and bark of trees and shrubs. When they ring the bases of trees, they can stop the nutrient flow and weaken trees substantially.

In winter, because grasses and other food are scarce, voles gnaw bark and can girdle bushes. This can damage or kill ornamental shrubs.

Groundhog/woodchucks hibernate during winter. Sometimes their fall tunnel preparations can harm shrubs or plantings. The large holes and ugly mounds they leave can damage lawns or planting beds.

How to manage this situation:

By reducing dense ground cover and leaf litter- it can make it less attractive for voles.

Hardware cloth can be placed around shrubs or tree bases to protect against girdling or chewing.

Raised beds, gravel borders, and limiting deep mulch can discourage tunneling. For perennials and bulbs, protective cages can prevent root disturbance while allowing healthy spring growth.

## Deer Browsing

Deer browse heavily in winter where woody plants are among the few available food sources. They commonly target arborvitae, yews, fruit trees, and many ornamental shrubs like forsythia. Repeated browsing can deform young trees and strip evergreens of essential foliage, reducing vigor in spring.

The most effective protection is to erect a full-height fence. One that is seven to eight feet tall should provide adequate protection.

Repellents work best when applied before heavy snowfall or during end of the season warming periods. The smell of the products is certainly not pleasant but is effective!

## Salt and wind damage

In the Littleton area (USDA Zones 3-4) winter damage to shrubs and perennials is often caused by desiccating winds and road salt exposure. Cold winter winds are really harmful to broadleaf evergreens such as boxwood, rhododendron, and hollies. When the ground is frozen, plant roots can't replace moisture lost through leaves. Cold winds pull moisture from foliage and can lead to winter burn. That is seen as browning or bleached patches on leaf surfaces and tips. Arborvitae, yew, and dwarf Alberta spruce may show needle browning.

Salt damage is common near roadsides or where salt was applied on walkways. Evergreen needles may turn brown and have stunted

# plant health

ed spring growth. White pine, spruce, and arborvitae are sensitive to salt spray. Salt that infiltrates the soil can damage roots by disrupting water uptake, causing wilting or dieback in perennials such as hosta or in shrubs like spirea and hydrangea. Over time, plants exposed to salt can become susceptible to pests and disease.

It is possible to have plantings that can tolerate

roadside salt such as Day-lily (*Hemerocallis* spp.) They handle salt spray better than many perennials. While heavy soil salt build-up can still cause stress, they generally perform well near sidewalks and driveways and rebound reliably each spring.

Also, *Rosa Rugosa* can handle being near salted roads, but, it has a tendency to spread vigorously.

Hopefully, there is min-

imal winter damage discovered by local gardeners as springtime returns to our area in a short time.

Littleton Garden Club welcomes new members. We stay active with monthly meetings, educational opportunities and tend flower gardens around Littleton. For more information, please visit our Web site at: <https://www.littletonhgardenclub.org/>.