



Graffiti Removal From Trees

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We often use trees as bulletin boards, from carving our proclamations of love to posting notifications of yard sales to displaying gang symbols. These acts usually are harmless to trees and can be removed with few problems, as long as there is no significant damage to plant tissues. However, paint and other chemical applications that reach those tissues can compromise tree health.

Paint and other coverings can clog the tiny openings on trees called lenticels, which allow trees to release CO₂ and take in O₂ for respiration. Also, paint may interfere with photoreceptors embedded in the stem. When these sensors are covered, it interferes with a tree's ability to sense changes in light quality, intensity and duration, which can disrupt normal plant processes. In addition, the bark and cambium layers can be damaged if a tree absorbs paint chemicals. These chemicals, especially those found in oil-based paints, can cause severe damage — even death — to thin-barked trees.

Removing paint from a tree is tedious work and requires attention to detail and consideration, to prevent further damage to the bark and living tissue.

Remove graffiti as soon as possible after it is applied. Prompt removal reduces the potential for tree damage, since most paint products contain harmful petroleum distillates and other oil properties.

Use citrus-based graffiti removal agents that contain such ingredients as natural orange extract. Citrus-based degreasers essentially are the same as graffiti removal agents and available at most retail stores. Citrus-based products are mostly biodegradable, contain few, if any, hazardous substances, and rinse clean with water. These degreasers do very little harm to trees. Always read the precautionary statements listed on a product label before using any product.

After applying a citrus-based removal agent, allow the remover to penetrate the graffiti message. The amount of time it takes a removal agent to penetrate depends on how long the graffiti has been on the tree. For example, recently applied graffiti can be sprayed with a removal agent and rinsed in 20 minutes. Graffiti that is several weeks or months old will require the removal agent to remain on the surface for 1-2 hours. Best results usually are achieved with at least two applications of the removal agent before rinsing.



Most graffiti won't harm trees, but in some cases oil-based paints can damage a tree's life support system by clogging lenticels and killing cambium tissue.

Use a hose with a high-pressure or stronger nozzle and a pressure washer to rinse and remove graffiti that has been treated with a removal agent. Be sure to use the pressure washer carefully on tree trunks — especially thin, smooth-barked trees — to avoid damage. High-pressure spray can damage the bark and vital tree components if applied intensely in one area. When using a high-pressure hose nozzle instead of a pressure washer, it might be helpful to agitate the treated graffiti with a stiff nylon or plastic brush to improve removal efforts. Wire brushes can damage a tree if not used carefully.

Be gentle with the tree trunk when removing graffiti. If the removal process is unsuccessful at first, multiple applications over time may be required. If the area of graffiti is small, sometimes a simple, creative aerosol paint combination can be used to cover or disguise gang symbols. Use natural, long, vertical spray strokes to match the tree color. Water-based paints are not as harmful as oil-based covers. This is always the last course of action.



Repeated applications of paint have completely destroyed this tree's vascular system.

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