

News Column for use the week of May 6, 2024
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Pruning Storm-Damaged Trees

Most of us have gotten lucky with the storms we have had so far this year. As we continue into thunderstorm season, there are a couple of things to be aware of when dealing with tree damage. Most of the time you have to decide whether a tree can be saved or if it needs to be taken down. Here is a simple checklist you can follow to help take care of your storm-damaged landscape.

First, you need to be safe when first checking on your landscape after the storm. Check for downed power lines or hanging branches. Don't venture under the tree until you know it is safe. If large limbs are hanging from the tree, be sure to take extra precautions. If the limb is too large for you to handle safely or is in a spot that can cause damage to a surrounding building, you can call an arborist who has the tools, training, and knowledge to remove the limb safely. The next thing you need to do is clean up and remove any debris so you do not trip over any of it.

Second, decide whether it is feasible to save the tree. If the bark has been split, exposing the cambium or the main trunk of the tree is split then the tree probably will not survive and should be removed. If there are too many broken limbs on the tree, destroying the form of the tree, the best option is to take down the tree and replace it. When pruning the tree, the topping method, which is done by removing all the main branches and only leaving stubs on the tree, is not a recommended pruning procedure. New branches will normally arise from the stubs, but they will not be as firmly attached as the original branches and are more likely to break in subsequent storms. In addition, the tree will put a lot of energy into developing new branches, leaving less energy to fight off diseases and insect attacks. Often the topped tree's life is shortened, causing you to remove the tree later anyway. Below you will find a couple of ways of pruning your tree if you decided the tree could be saved.

Third, prune off the broken branches to the next larger branch or to the trunk, depending on which limb is broken. If you are removing the limb back to the trunk, do not cut flush with the trunk but rather at the collar area, which is between the branch and the trunk of the tree. Cutting flush with the trunk leaves a much larger wound than cutting at the collar and takes longer for the tree to heal the cut. Middle-aged or younger vigorous trees can handle having up to one-third of the crown removed and still make a surprisingly swift comeback. Older trees can take longer to recover from vigorous pruning.

Remove the larger limbs in stages. If you try to take off a large limb in one cut, it will often break off before you are finished cutting and will strip the bark of the trunk. Instead, make a cut about 15 inches from the trunk on the limb you are removing. Start from the bottom and cut one-third of the way up through the limb. Make the second cut from the top down but start 2 inches further away from the trunk than the first top cut. The branch will break away as you make the second cut. The third and final cut, made at the collar area, will remove the stub that is left from the tree.

Those are just a few ways to help with the summer storm cleanup of trees. If you happen to have damage from any storms and want help deciding what needs to be done with your trees,

please feel free to stop by or contact me in the Washington office, at 785-325-2121 or khatesohl@ksu.edu.

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