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News and Information from UT-TSU Extension Wilson County

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Storm Damage to Trees – Assessment and Care

Strong storms in the area recently caused vast damage to homes, schools, trees and what ever was in their rapid moving path. Now it is time to clean up the aftermath.

Understanding the impacts of storms on trees will allow you to develop management approaches to care for trees after damage has occurred. Trees may be uprooted, decapitated or suffer massive crown loss as branches are broken by the force of the wind. Loss of large portions of the crown results in tree stress, a reduction of growth and entry sites for insects and disease. Depending on the degree of damage, some trees will recover on their own, others need immediate care to repair the damage incurred and some are so irreversibly damaged that they will eventually die.

The treatment of storm-damaged trees requires prompt action and wise assessment. Factors to consider are whether the tree has damage that is relatively superficial, damage that can be treated or damage that is beyond repair. If more than 30 to 50 percent of the main branches or trunk are severely split or broken, extensive repairs are questionable.

Several types of damage occur to trees during storms. The first and most severe damage occurs when the main stem or trunk of the injured tree splits or is broken. Larger, mature trees are most susceptible to this type of the damage. Past tree injuries and pest problems often predispose the tree to storm damage by weakening the wood structure. Trees do not heal wounds. Trees can only grow over old wounds and seal them off. Wounds are structurally weaker than solid wood. Generally, if a tree has lost more than 50 percent of its crown, the probability of future survival is poor.

A second damage category is bending of young trees. The recovery of a tree to an upright position will depend on the degree of bending and the length of time the tree has remained in the bent condition. Trees bent near or past horizontal will probably not recover and should be replaced. Individual tops, or even entire trees, can sometimes be staked and tied to hasten recovery. However, the results are usually mixed. Some trees recover and others will not.

A third damage category is blow-over of trees. Often trees that blow over have root failure from a disease or those with shallow roots or roots in a hard pan area of soil.

The final and least damaging category is that of broken branches where the break occurs away from the main stem. The higher the break and smaller the diameter of the break point, the higher the probability that the tree will recover. Broken branches generally do not affect tree survival unless more than 50 percent of the crown is involved. These branches need maintenance quickly so that they do not become a hazard and to decrease the risk of decay organisms entering the wounds.

For moderate pruning jobs close to ground level, homeowners should follow these guidelines. Smaller branches should be pruned back to the point where they join larger ones. Make the cut at a slant next to a bud that can produce new growth. Do not leave branch stubs as they encourage rot and decay. Large branches that are broken should be cut back to either the trunk or main limb. Do not cut the branch flush with the trunk. Instead, cut outside the collar at the base of the branch. Take all necessary safety

precautions! Broken limbs are often under tension and can kick back unexpectedly during cutting. Be alert for down and damaged power and utility lines and broken limbs that are hanging.

A damaged limb may strip healthy bark from the tree. To repair this type of damage, cut any ragged edges of torn bark with a sharp knife or chisel. Take care not to remove any more healthy bark and expose more live tissue than necessary. If possible, the wound left by the cut should be shaped like an elongated football with the pointed ends of the cut running vertically along the trunk or limb. There is no need to apply tree wound dressings to prevent decay-causing infection. Research has shown that wound dressings (paint, tar and others) do not prevent decay but may interfere with rapid healing and in some cases can serve as food sources for harmful microorganisms

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