

Pruning Storm Damaged Trees

Winter storms may cause serious tree damage. Often a decision must be made on whether a tree may be saved or not.

Here is a checklist on care of a storm-damaged landscape:

1. Be safe: Check for down power lines or hanging branches. Don't venture under the tree until it is safe. If large limbs are hanging precariously, a certified arborist has the tools, training and knowledge to do the work safely.
2. Clean-up: Remove all debris so you don't trip over it.
3. Decide whether it is feasible to save a tree. If the bark has been split so the cambium is exposed or the main trunk split, the tree will probably not survive and should be removed. If there are so many broken limbs that the form of the tree is destroyed, replacement will be the best option. Topping, where all the main branches are cut back so that there are only stubs left, is not a recommended pruning procedure. Though new branches will normally arise from the stubs, they are not as firmly attached as the original branches and will likely break in subsequent storms. Also, the tree must use a lot of energy to grow new branches, leaving less to fight diseases and insect attacks. Often, the topped tree's life is shortened.
4. Broken branches should be pruned back to the next larger branch or back to the trunk. If cutting back to the trunk, do not cut flush to the trunk, but make the cut at the collar area. The collar area is the transition area between the branch and the trunk. Cutting flush with the trunk will leave a much larger wound than cutting at the collar and will take longer to heal. Middle-aged or younger vigorous trees can have up to 1/3 of the crown removed and still make a surprisingly swift comeback.
5. Large limbs should be taken off in stages. If you try to take off a large limb in one cut, it will often break before the cut is finished and strip bark from the tree. Instead, first make a cut about 15 inches from the trunk. Start from the bottom and cut one-third of the way up through the limb. The second should be made from the top down but started 2 inches further away from the trunk than the first cut. The branch will break away as you make the second cut. The third cut is made to remove the stub that is left and is made at the collar area.

Note: This can be dangerous! Consider hiring a trained arborist to do major work such as this. Also, a good arborist knows how to prune trees so that storm breakage is less likely to occur. Preventing damage is better than trying to fix it once it has happened.

The Arbor Day Foundation has an excellent web site that contains more detailed information including images showing examples of trees that can be saved and trees that cannot. The URL is:

<http://www.arborday.org/media/stormindex.cfm>



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