

Pruning Storm Damaged Trees

May and June are peak tornado season in Kansas. After many years of relatively low tornadic activity, many forecasters are predicting major storms this summer.

Along with jeopardizing our safety and property, summer storms can ravage the trees around our homes, sometimes causing damage to our homes and cars themselves.

It can be difficult to determine if a tree will survive heavy storm damage—sometimes only time will tell. Often a tree that is left lopsided or that has sustained damage to the trunk has a grim future. However, if you're tree has only lost one or two major limbs, or many small limbs, it may be salvageable.

1. Be safe: Immediately after the storm has passed, check for downed power lines or broken branches still hanging in the canopy. Don't venture near or under the tree until it is determined to be safe. If large limbs are hanging precariously, a certified arborist has the tools, training and knowledge to do the work safely. Also, downed limbs and trees may be under compression. Cutting through a limb under compression can release that energy causing the limb to whip upwards with significant force.

2. Remove small debris: At first, tree damage can look worse than it actually is. After a storm, your yard may be littered with small branches and leaves. Trees may intentionally shed small clusters of leaves and twigs to lighten the overall weight of their larger branches. Trees that suffer only leaf and twig loss will make a full recovery but should be watered through drought periods to encourage new growth.

3. Prune: Prune broken branches back to the next large branch or to the trunk. If cutting back to the trunk, do not make the cut flush with the trunk but rather cut at the collar area—between the branch and the trunk—think turtleneck when looking for this spot. Cutting flush with the trunk will leave a much larger wound than cutting at the collar and it will take longer to heal.

4. Age of the tree: Consider the age of your tree. Middle-aged or younger, vigorous trees can have up to one-third of the crown removed and still make a surprisingly swift comeback. Older trees are less resilient and removing the tree entirely may be the safest option for severe damage.

5. Plan your pruning: Take large limbs 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. Make the second cut from the top down but start 2 inches further away from the trunk than the first. The branch will break away as you make the second cut. The third cut, made at the collar area, removes the stub that is left.

6. No products needed: Do not apply any products over the cut areas. Trees will heal on their own, although the process takes years and can leave them susceptible to diseases and insects until the wound completely heals. Using a sealant, even those made for trees, increases the amount of time until the tree heals.

7. Remove if necessary: If the bark has been split and the cambium (inner trunk) is exposed or the main trunk has split, the tree will not survive long term and should be removed. If there are so many broken limbs that the tree's form is ruined, replacement is the best option. Topping, where all the main branches are cut and 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

more likely to break in subsequent storms. Also, the tree will use a lot of energy to develop new branches, leaving less energy to fight off disease and insect attacks.

8. Pick and prune right from the start: The best protection from storm damage is selecting the right tree, planting it in the correct location and pruning it for optimal branch strength. Any tree that is “fast growing” is likely to have weak branches. These trees, if selected, should be placed far from your home, driveway and wiring. Proper pruning in the first few years of a trees life, and needed maintenance after that saves money and heartache in the long run.

9. Make tree care a priority: With the severe drought of 2018, tree issues will begin to appear in our landscape this summer and may continue for many more seasons. A stressed tree is more susceptible to disease and insects, but it may also experience limb die back. These limbs may stay attached for many months becoming brittle and vulnerable to breakage. Any time you see large dead branches they should be removed by yourself or a professional. Always water trees, even established trees, in times of drought to prevent this type of stress.

10. Consult the experts: If you’ve determined an arborist is needed, consider using an arborist certified by either the Kansas Arborists Association (<http://www.kansasarborist.com/>) or the International Association of Arborists (<http://www.isa-arbor.com/>).

For more information on proper pruning, watering or tree selection, call the Shawnee County Extension Master Gardener Response Line 785-232-0062 ext. 105. Volunteers are in every weekday afternoon, 1 pm-5 pm, and Friday from 8 am-5 pm.