

Storm Damaged Trees

Many of us experienced power outages and down limbs and trees with the extreme winds late in July. Although the smaller limbs have been picked up and the power is back, the larger limbs and dead trees take much longer to deal with.

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 your tree has only lost a limb or two, it may be save able. Below are the first steps to assessing your tree, and what to do if the damage is more than you can handle.

1. Be safe: Immediately after the storm has passed, check for downed 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. 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 but do not dismay—this damage will not impact the long term health of the tree.

3. Prune: Prune broken branches back to the next larger 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. 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.

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. DNR: Decide whether it is feasible to save the tree. If the bark has been split so the cambium (inner trunk) is exposed or the main trunk has split, the tree probably will not survive 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. 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/>).

If you have trees of great value, consider pruning properly to avoid storm breakage to begin with. A good arborist can help you create a sturdy tree structure. Preventing damage is always easier than trying to fix the damage after it's occurred.