

## **Another Wind Storm, More Tree Limbs Down**

### **AGRI-VIEWS**

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Another wind storm blew through the area this week and a new set of limbs and branches hit the ground. Someone asked me this week if we're having more wind storms and damage than normal? Which caused me to respond, first of all with "what's normal" and secondly with "not really"! We live in the Great Plains. We will have wind. We have a lot of thunderstorms that roll across the plains. We will have wind. Our trees grow up with the wind, are shaped by the wind, and are often killed by the wind.

Straight winds that we have, often day after day, is different in nature than the winds we often get with thunderstorms. If memory serves me correct, we've basically had four strong wind storms this summer. Every one of them have come from a different direction! Daily straight line winds pretty much run horizontal to the ground and from fairly predictable directions. Thunderstorm winds can be straight line winds but we can also have strong down drafts from cold air falling or being pushed out of thunderstorms. Daily winds ebb and flow much like waves on the ocean. Thunderstorm winds can be stacked so just as a tree branch may be starting to return from a strong gust, an even stronger gust hits it pushing it further or exposing it to unusual stresses.

There's a lot of physics involved in wind damage and there's a lot of tree physiology and biology involved with how strong a tree is and how susceptible it is to breaking. I've touched on all the wind physics I'm going to touch on, but the tree biology is another story. To understand why we are seeing a lot of tree damage, we need to go back to the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, the tree disease Dutch Elm Disease moved in and started to kill our most abundant street and yard tree in the city and state, the American Elm. Lots of new trees were being planted, all too often with one emphasis, grow fast!

I have an adage about trees: grow fast, die young! There is a fairly direct correlation between speed of growth and strength of wood. Oaks are strong because they grow more slowly. Most of the trees that I see damaged after these storms have been silver maple, hackberry and Siberian Elm. Virtually every single one of them has had physiological defects that caused branches or entire trees to fail. Sometimes it is as simple as bad structure that wasn't corrected early in life; this would be the tree that splits in half because it had two main leaders. The other common flaw is internal decay. Most of this comes back to bad pruning earlier in its life.

The first step in keeping a tree healthy is to plant the right tree in the right place. But the second step is to prune it correctly as it grows. Topping or stubbing a tree, where all the branches are cut back to a large naked stub, is NOT an approved pruning practice. If you are going to do that, you might as well cut it down to the ground and plant a new tree as you've just given it a death sentence! Those big cuts on the stubs will never heal and rot WILL get started there and run through the entire tree like cancer.

The other important consideration is that tree limbs are big and pruning big trees is dangerous work. We've lost several people in this state already this year in tree trimming accidents. Hire a professional who is also a Kansas certified arborist. Yes, trees are important to us. They will be damaged by wind and ice. Take the time to plant a proper tree and care for it, and then hire a professional to care for it when necessary!