

Dealing With Wind Storm Damage to Trees

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

We know that in Kansas we will have wind storms and ice storms from time to time. We also know that depending on the severity of these two events, we will have damage to trees and we will have to deal with the aftermath. The biggest challenge to homeowners is not in doing enough for the trees, but in not doing too much to the trees.

Proper pruning during the growth and development of a tree and simply good tree care through the years can go a long ways to reducing damage from storms. The challenge comes in that too many trees aren't pruned as much as they are merely hacked on by mis-informed homeowners or tree trimmers.

Proper pruning involves selective cutting back of problem or potential problem branches. These cuts are made in such a way that: there is not tearing of bark, the pruning cut minimizes the exposed wood, branches are removed back to the next larger limb, and the pruning cut is made in a manner that allows the tree to grow over the wound in the shortest time possible. Proper pruning does not leave large stubs with no branches, a practice commonly called topping. A good job of pruning often results in what appears to be very little done to the tree, when in fact a great deal of wood may have been actually removed.

Trees can not heal over pruning wounds like we can when we have a cut or scrape. A pruning cut results in the tree trying to seal off the area inside the tree and then over a period of years growing new tissue, callous tissue, over the cut surface. A proper pruning cut results in a compartmentalized area that is sealed off from the rest of the functioning tissue of the tree, thereby isolating any decay or rot organisms. Treating the cut is not necessary and is discouraged.

An improper pruning cut results in an area that never seals off or takes so long to seal that decay organisms run rampant in the tree creating large hollow areas and rotted trunks that become weak and a risk in future storms. Where two branches join there is naturally occurring tissue that is dormant but just waiting to grow in case of an "injury". This bark ridge collar can be readily seen and you want to make pruning cuts just on the outside of that as this is where the callous tissue formation will start.

After a wind storm you want to remove any broken branches still in the tree IF you can do so safely. Branches that are still partially attached need to be cut off. Simply pulling on them will cause bark to tear which creates a larger wound. Limbs that are too big or too high to be safely reached by you need to be dealt with by a certified arborist. Ultimately, the tree will be better off with less attention than excessive limb trimming.

What you absolutely do not want to do is to have a tree topped. Topping cuts back most, or all, of the branches to large stubs. The large stubs don't ever heal over and result in a proliferation of rapid growing new branches that are not attached to the heartwood of the tree, as a good limb should be, but only attached to the bark. Attachment to the bark only is a very weak union and the new branches are more prone to wind and ice storm damage than the branches that were removed.

If you hire someone to trim your trees, make sure that they are a certified and trained arborist and make sure they understand that they are NOT to top or stub out your tree. Storms will damage trees at some point in time. Proper pruning during the life of the tree can reduce the damage, but ultimately, too little pruning is better off than excessive pruning!