

Cleaning Up After the Storm

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I hate ice. Ice should only be allowed in iced beverages. I hate ice storms, I hate hail storms. I can take lightning, tornadoes, blizzards, rain, even drought, but I hate ice. Unfortunately, my personal preferences don't change the fact that we had an ice storm last weekend. Trying to look at the silver lining here, it could have been much worse. It was not as bad as the 2007 ice storm, but it was bad enough!

Now that the ice has melted, we can start focusing on what we do with our trees and woody ornamentals. Many homeowners often feel that they have to do something right now! But you don't have to. In fact, it's better off to approach post storm cleanup in a very deliberate fashion. Certainly get all the branches that are on the ground gathered up and to the curb where the city, or someone, can get them picked up. But from there, let's take some time to analyze what needs to be done. Often, what looks like severe damage, isn't so bad a few weeks later!

First and foremost is safety. As a homeowner you don't want to be dealing with any limbs that are close to, or are in contact with, power lines or any overhead lines. That is a job for professionals. It wouldn't take much to bring a limb down on to lines, pulling them to the ground, or worse yet, come into contact with a live power line and electrocute yourself. Secondly, look out for branches that are broken off but still up in the tree. These are frequently called widow-makers because you never know when one may come loose and fall on you! Or, in the process of falling, they make take down more branches with them.

You need to resist the urge to grab any limbs that are still partially attached, but hanging down within reach, and pulling. Granted, a good strong pull may get them loose and to the ground, but you'll usually end up tearing a bunch of bark off in the process. The bigger the wound, the better chance there is for wood decay organisms to get into the tree. If you can reach the limb, where it is still attached, cut the limb off at that point so that the bark doesn't get ripped off the tree.

You need to evaluate the condition of the tree. If 50% or more of the tree was broken out by ice, the best course of action is to probably remove the tree. Less damage than that may well be worth the time to have the tree professionally pruned. If the tree was split down the center, as often happens with ornamental pears, there is no saving it. Just remove it this winter and replace it with a flowering crabapple instead.

Sometimes the best approach is to do nothing and let the tree try to recover on its own. One practice that is NOT advisable and is the worst thing you can do is to top the tree. In topping, all small branches are cut out and the larger branches are just cut off leaving big stubs. These large branches will never heal properly. It will cause a proliferation of new growth that is poorly attached to the tree. Ultimately, it just creates more damage later on and shortens the life of the tree by allowing wood decay organisms to enter the tree.

If you want to have your tree trimmed, hire a professional arborist. They understand how a tree grows and what can be done to remove injured branches to improve the long term health of the tree. They also know when the damage is too severe and when removal of the tree is in order. Be wary of individuals going door to door looking for business. Whomever you hire, make sure that they have a business license and proof of insurance. The damage from the ice storm was bad enough, don't make it worse by hiring someone who doesn't know what they are doing!