

Hail and Wind Damage on Plants

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Recent storms have been generating a lot of questions about hail, wind and even rain damage on garden and landscape plants. Thunderstorms, severe or not, can bring a lot of forces to bear on plants. Hail and wind can shred leaves. Severe storms can literally strip all the leaves off of a plant and nearly destroy it. Then you tandem that with rain, heavy rain, as is often the case in these storms and you have a potential triple whammy.

Here is the very first thing you should do after one of these events: nothing! That 12 to 24 hour period right after one of these storms is when things can look the absolute worst. You're already stressed out about the storm and then you start seeing what it has done to your plants and you can have this overwhelming need to try to "fix" it. In reality your attempt to fix a perceived, but often imaginary, problem, can just make it worse.

Heavy rain pounds the soil and compacts the soil surface. This can result in a thick crust that can make it hard for new seedlings to break through and for oxygen to get down to the roots. If you just planted seeds, you may need to do some light irrigation to help seedlings break through or a very careful light scraping with a garden rake, as the soil dries, to help break up that crust.

The other issue with rain is if you get a lot of it. Most plants can handle about 24 hours of standing water. After that roots start to die as the soil is saturated with water and often covered with water and this prevents oxygen from getting to the roots. Standing water quite literally causes plants to die from asphyxiation. Hot temperatures cause damage to show up even quicker for several physiological reasons. In some cases you may be able to channel the water away and get the standing water removed which will facilitate drying of the soil. If standing water can't be removed, you will see considerable damage to plants.

That last thing that happens after a big rain, especially if it's been kind of dry, is that the plants tend to act like a sponge and take up a lot of water in a hurry. This actually makes parts of the plant extremely brittle. If wind has caused plants to lean, your attempt to straighten them up can often result in breaking the plants off. If left along, most garden plants will straighten back up on their own in a few days.

Wind can lean plants over. Newly planted trees may be partially uprooted. In severe cases even large trees can be blown over by the roots. It is very impractical to try to straighten up everything except a recently planted tree. Trees that have been in the ground for three or four years or longer are almost impossible to straighten back up. Attempts to do so will often cause more damage and problems than they've already experienced!

Hail can be very devastating, even small hail if there is enough of it or it is wind driven. It can shred the leaves to tatters. If you are finding this in your garden, the best thing to do, again, is nothing, at least for the first week or two. Even though the leaves may look tattered, if they are still green, they are still carrying on photosynthesis. Most plants will put on new foliage fairly quickly and the tattered, yet still functioning leaves will help speed this process along. If the damage is severe, as in a green stick or beat down to a stub, then replanting may be the best approach and it's early enough in the season to be successful with this.

Yes, the storm damage can look bad the morning after. But just walk away for a day or two and then come back and it may not look so bad. The last thing you want to do is make a situation worse by trying to help when you should've left well enough alone!