

## Dealing With Severe Storm Damage

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Last week's weather reminds us that we live in a state with extremely variable weather and extremely powerful weather. Wind, excessive rain, and hail of all sizes can impact our lawns, yards and gardens. As human beings we have a strong innate desire to help. Whether it's people, animals or plants, we thing we need to help. It's one of the endearing features of our species. Unfortunately, and as hard as it is for some gardeners and homeowners to accept, often the best thing we can do after severe weather is NOTHING! Leave the plants alone!

About the only time that I would recommend intervening is if tree branches have fallen on garden or ornamental plants. Yes, go ahead and carefully pick those up and get them into the trash or a brush pile. If you have a lot of leaves and small twigs on the lawn you may also want to rake those up. Often times after a few days the leaves dry up to not much of anything and disappear into the mulch zone the next time you mow them.

When thunderstorms roll through they frequently are accompanied by all three of these weather extremes. But many plants are resilient and can recover very well on their own schedule. You don't want to rush into doing anything other than removing tree branches. Trying to do anything the morning after a storm can make matters worse. Let's work through these three issues (rain, wind, hail) and talk about the impact on plants.

Rain is the most common component of summer thunderstorms, often to the point of excess. Short term flooding is common simply because rain can fall far faster than soil can absorb it. Monday evening's rain came at an equivalent rate of 3 inches per hour. Fortunately it didn't last for an hour! But many soils can only absorb water at the rate of a few tenths of an inch per hour. You will have run off and you will have ponding. For short periods of time that isn't an issue. Even 24 to 36 hours of standing water won't be a problem for most plants. But if hours turns into days we can start to see some issues. Even if there isn't water standing on the surface, soils can be saturated to the point of no oxygen. Without oxygen, roots start to die and root rots can then get started. The other problem with excessive rain is that plants will often overindulge, for lack of a better term, and become waterlogged and brittle which leads to other problems.

With wet soils and high winds many plants will start to lean or get bent over. Gardeners may then try to straighten them back up the day after the storm. The waterlogged plants become very brittle and can break easily if pressure is put on them. Leave them alone! In a few days most plants will start to straighten up. Entire root systems of trees can become tilted with the tree leaning. Leave them alone. Trying to straighten them back up often results in far more damage than doing nothing at all. Besides, leaning trees have more character!

Hail can be the most devastating of the thunderstorm issues. It is merciless and even small pea sized hail can shred leaves of plants. Again, the most important thing is to do nothing at all. Plants early in the season can regenerate leaves in a hurry. Don't start cutting off damaged leaves. Even leaves that are shredded or have holes in them can produce necessary food through photosynthesis. Let the plant regenerate new leaves and then you can prune off sad looking shredded leaves. Don't stress the plant further by fertilizing right away. Just leave it alone. If after a week to ten days annual garden or bedding plants aren't generating new leaves, then you might have to replace them.

The damage from these thunderstorms can look bad and honestly the best thing you can do is simply NOT look at plants for several days. I know it's hard and you want to help, but just steer clear and give those plants a week or two to start to recover!