

Caring for Hurricane-Damaged Home Landscape Plants

by

David Shibles, Urban Horticulturist, Polk County Extension Service

Hurricane-damaged plants should be cared for as soon as possible after the storm. Small trees and shrubs, particularly those uprooted or damaged, should be securely staked in their original growing positions. Until the tree or shrub is reset, make every effort to protect the exposed root system and prevent it from drying out. Cover exposed roots with soil, moist burlap sacks, or moist sphagnum moss. Remove damaged roots so the tree can be reset at ground level.

Once reset, trees should be held in position with stakes or guy wires. Trees with trunk diameters less than 2 inches can usually be anchored by two or three 48-inch, 2-by-2 inch wooden stakes. Place the stakes about a foot outside the root ball and insert them 18 inches into the soil. Secure the trunk to the stake with ties made from wide, smooth material or hose-covered twine.

Trees 2 inches or larger in diameter should be guyed with three or four cables. Secure guys to deeply driven short stakes evenly spaced outside the root ball. Run guys through rubber hose and secure them to the trunk at only one level. Mark the support guys with bright materials to prevent accidents. Adjust guys several times during the growing season so that girdling and injury to the trunks are minimized. Remove all support stakes and guys after one year.

Once the tree is staked back into position, use soil to fill in around the root area. Firm the soil around roots to eliminate air pockets and provide support. An excess of soil over the normal root area can be damaging, thus, only replace soil that has been washed or worked away from the roots.

Many trees and shrubs remain upright following a hurricane; however they may have been tossed back and forth creating a hollowing of the soil around the major support roots. These trees or shrubs will also need soil and water added to the root area to eliminate air pockets.

Trees that have been reset in the ground should be watered twice a week and fertilizer should not be applied. Until they become re-established, fertilizer will be of no major benefit and may cause possible injury to new tender feeder roots.

Broken branches should be sawed or pruned from trees and shrubs. Always make clean, even cuts and remove only those that are damaged. Where possible, cut branches back to major limbs or the main trunk, cutting just outside of the branch collar.

Large branches that are too heavy to hold while cutting require three separate cuts to prevent bark stripping. Make the first cut on the lower side of the branch about 15 inches away from the trunk and one third of the way through the branch. Make the second cut downward from top of the branch about 17 to 18 inches from the main trunk to cause the limb to split clearly between the two cuts without tearing bark on the trunk. The remaining stub is easily supported with one hand while you cut it from the tree.

The old standard recommendation was to paint wounds with a quality tree wound dressing to protect the cut surface from wood-rotting organisms and cracking upon drying. Research has shown, however, the wound dressings do not prevent decay. This practice is justified only in situations where aesthetics are important.

Where bark injury has occurred, cut away ragged edges to make a clean, smooth wound. It is not necessary to paint the wound with a wound dressing.

In cases where all branches have been destroyed, it may be wise to remove the entire tree especially trees such as pine, which do not normally regain their natural form. With other trees such as oaks, where strong bottom limbs still exist, it may be wise to keep the tree. However, emerging sprouts from the ends of large, cut limbs will be poorly secured to the tree and are likely to fall from the tree during a storm. In addition, decay organisms usually enter these large wounds. Damaged trees already declining due to insects or disease should be removed. Trees that have been defoliated by high winds should be saved, as most will resume growth.

Lawn grasses should be freed of fallen leaves, silt, mud and debris, which will cause a smothering of the grass. Grasses and plants that have been under water should resume their growth once the water is drained away. Standing water may have injured some moisture-sensitive shrubs like pittosporum, although the symptoms of injury may not appear until the next summer.

Plants that have been damaged by Hurricane Charley will need careful attention through fall and spring. During periods of drought, damaged plants need mulching and extra watering.
