LANDSCAPE CAN SHIELD A HOME DURING STORMS

It's heating up in the tropics, and that means we are well into hurricane season. We all know how we need to prepare our homes for these powerful storms, but have you ever thought about preparing your landscape for hurricanes?

Although a lot of damage to structures is due to strong hurricane winds, damage can also occur from failing trees and flying landscape debris during a storm. Building codes exist to reduce damage from strong winds and high water, but there are no standards for designing and maintaining hurricane-resistant landscapes.

Is it possible to create a landscape that can reduce hurricane and storm damage to structures and plantings? The answer is yes. By choosing the right plants and maintaining them, we can reduce storm damage. Storm-sustaining trees should be selected for their root development, mass, density and growth characteristics. Most of Florida's native trees and plants are good choices. These plants have proven resistant to strong winds by surviving previous storms. It's not that exotic plants can't survive hurricanes - they can, but they need to display the same characteristics as the native plants.

A storm "survivor" tree is one that is compact, with a low center of gravity, has a strong, sturdy trunk and a large, deep root system. Our native live oak is a great example of the "survivor" tree.

On the other hand, the "weakest link" of landscapes during storms is a tree that has a high center of gravity with a dense canopy, a weak trunk and shallow roots. Tall, slender pine trees are examples of the "weakest link" - especially those that once belonged to a pine forest before suburban development. These pines relied on one another for wind resistance and support during storms. Without each other, they are unprotected from storm damage.

Trees that are thought to be hurricane-resistant may still be vulnerable to strong winds. Construction damage, poor growing conditions and disease or insect problems make trees susceptible to toppling during storms.

Strong, dense landscape trees can deflect wind from structures during storms. However, new plantings should be placed far enough from buildings and utilities so they can sway in the storm. Thick, dense hedges should be placed in front of these trees. The shrubs act as a wall to divert winds and debris from buildings.

Trees less than a year old are more susceptible to hurricane damage than older trees. They are not as strong and do not have a deep root system. These trees should be anchored with tree supports if a storm threatens.

Proper maintenance needs to be practiced during the life of any tree. The first step is to provide the tree, with good growing conditions and to keep it as healthy as you can, free of insects and diseases.

Second, proper pruning needs to be maintained on the tree. A strong, deep-rooted tree may not fall during a storm, but weak limbs in the canopy may. Broken, dead and damaged limbs can be torn from trees during a storm and turned into dangerous projectiles. Even "survivors" can grow very large and unbalanced, which could make them hazards during storms.

Regular pruning during a tree's development should create a sturdy, well-spaced framework of healthy branches with an open canopy that allows air to flow freely through it. It is important for a tree to have a central leader with no narrow forks or branches that leave the trunk at an acute angle. Limb crotches.
should be between 45 and 90 degrees. Narrow V-shaped crotches have the tendency to split.

When a storm is on the horizon, gardeners' who have kept their trees thinned and in proportion have little to do to prepare. The neglected tree that has become immensely overgrown is another matter. Just remember the "survivor" trees are hurricane-resistant, not hurricane-proof.

For more information on preparing your landscape for hurricanes, please contact the Osceola master gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls from Mondays to Fridays from 10 am to 2 pm. Check out a couple of upcoming seminars, Low-Maintenance Landscapes on July 9 and Butterfly Gardening on July 11. Both will be at 6:30 p.m. in the Agricultural Center. Call to register.

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