HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

CLEANING UP THE LANDSCAPE AFTER THE STORM

Hurricane Charley left quite a mess of our landscapes and cleaning them up will take some time. Fallen trees, broken limbs, smashed shrubs, and shredded flowers encompassed most of our yards the morning after the storm. Some of these plants can be saved; others will have to be passed on for compost.

Thousands of trees have fallen throughout the county. Young trees, small trees, trees with a good framework, and least damaged trees are the most worth salvaging and have the best chance of survival. If the roots are one-third to one-half exposed, saving the tree will be difficult. Tilted trees are in no immediate danger, but should be repaired as soon as possible.

It is best to reset only small trees, since large trees are severely weakened, heavy, and may fall again, possibly damaging property. Be sure to use stakes or anchors (buried at least 18 inches) on the tree so that ordinary winds from any direction will not allow the tree to fall again. The tree will have to be staked for about one year, until it gains enough strength and roots to stand on its on. Treat the tree like it was just transplanted, providing it with adequate water. Also, refrain from fertilizing the tree for at least a couple of months.

If a tree is to be removed, decide what to do with tree stumps. If you are going to leave them, cut them off flush with the ground. If you plan to remove them, leave 4 feet of stump standing. Removal will be cheaper and easier if the stump can be pulled, rather than dug out.

Broken and damaged limbs of a tree can affect the shape as well as the general health of the tree. Prune the tree properly to avoid additional damage. Do this by removing the broken or torn limbs to avoid unnecessary bark stripping. Cut the limb just above the branch collar or ridge between the limb and trunk. Do not make a cut flush with the trunk or branch, as this can prevent the tree from healing the pruning wound. For large and difficult pruning jobs and to ensure the health of your tree contact an ISA Certified Arborist to do the work for you.

Besides the trees, there may also be damage to the shrubs and perennials in the landscape. Many of these plants also have a lean to them that should be corrected. For smaller shrubs and plants, it may be easier to dig them up and replant them than to trying to stake them upright again. Large, woody shrubs will most likely have to be staked.

Broken limbs on shrubs and perennials should be cleanly pruned back to the next main branch. Some plants may need to be heavily pruned in order to remove excess weight and to help the plant to remain upright. If not severely damaged, most shrubs and perennials should quickly recover from the devastation.

The high velocity winds of Hurricane Charley also "stripped" many of the plants of their leaves. In my landscape, it was noticeably the crape myrtles and bougainvilleas. However, this is nothing to be worried about. The majority of these plants are already pushing out new leaves. Apply some fertilizer to these plants to help accelerate their new growth.

Erosion of the soil is another concern with hurricanes. If the roots of the plants are exposed due to soil erosion, topsoil needs to be placed on the bare roots. Only add enough soil to replenish what was lost. Too much soil will cause the plant to suffocate.

Cleaning up the landscape mess caused by Hurricane Charley will take some time. Be patient and do not overwork in the hot, Florida weather. Also, be careful. If you have doubts about whether or not you should
cut a tree down yourself or get a professional to do it, get the professional. It is much better to be safe than sorry. Leave the hard work to the guys who do it for a living.

For more information on restoring your landscape after the hurricane, proper pruning techniques, or any other question, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm.

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