PROTECTING LANDSCAPES FROM HURRICANES

It's June, and that means it is also hurricane season.

As the tropics heat up, we need to get ready for that possible storm that may head our way. We all know that we need to prepare our homes for these powerful storms, but have you ever thought about preparing your landscape for a hurricane?

Although a lot of damage to structures is caused by 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.

It is possible to create a landscape that can reduce hurricane and storm damage to structures and plantings by choosing the right plants and maintaining them properly.

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 proved 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, and has a strong, sturdy trunk and a large, deep root system. Our native live oak is a great example of a "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 - 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. Shrubs 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. Proper pruning needs to be maintained.

Limb crotches should be 45° to 90°. Narrow V-shaped crotches have a 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.
If you have concern about the structure of your tree, contact a certified arborist for an inspection. Certified arborists have studied trees and taken an exam in order to hold their title. Check the references of tree trimmers before hiring them.

For information on preparing your landscape for hurricanes or for a list of certified arborists in the area, call Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday.

How to Minimize Wind Damage in the South Florida Garden gives more information on landscape preparedness.

See also Caring for Hurricane-Damaged Home Landscape Plants

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