

Hurricane Preparedness for the Landscape
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It's never too early to prepare ourselves for natural disasters, particularly for hurricanes here in central Florida. We all know we need to prepare ourselves and our homes for these powerful storms, but have you ever thought about preparing your landscape for hurricanes?

As we all know, not all of the damage to structures is due to strong hurricane winds alone. Damage also occurs 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 correctly, 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, given the right environment and care during its life.

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, small root zones, and disease or insect problems make trees susceptible to toppling during storms.

Poor designed landscapes can be a hazard during a hurricane, however a well-designed one can be an asset. 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 strong winds. 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 and for a free publication on how to properly prune a tree, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to answer your gardening and landscaping questions Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm.