HORTICULTURE COLUMN

PRUNING TREES FOR HURRICANES

Early September is prime time for hurricanes. Residents are warned to prune trees properly to prevent limb breakage in the strong winds of hurricanes. But trimming out weak, dead and diseased tree limbs is dangerous, so think safety. Why is tree pruning important? A punctured porch, a ripped roof or a demolished Dodge may be prevented by proper pruning.

Pruning to prevent hazardous situations is especially important this time of year, but don't cut costs, risking injury to yourself and others. The costs of repairs or liability is outrageous compared with the cost of hiring a competent arborist to do maintenance pruning.

Many tree-service workers are going beyond the basics of on-the-job training and getting extra help to increase their skills. They take special workshops and have to pass an intensive test to become certified by the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA). This demonstration of professionalism costs them, but the benefits to a customer are a well-trained and safety-conscious worker. When looking for a tree-service company, ask if the workers are ISA certified.

At a minimum, make sure they are licensed to do business in the county, and get proof of liability insurance from their insurance carrier to make sure you are not responsible if they have an injury on your property.

Don't trees grow OK on their own? Yes, trees in the wild will grow upright with single, straight trunks and well-spaced side branches. But sometimes they will have crossed limbs, many originating from one place, or branches that grow upright almost parallel to the trunk. These weak branch forms will eventually break.

However if these weak branch forms are allowed to develop on street trees, yard trees or park trees, they become a hazard, a liability, a lawsuit waiting to happen. Co-dominant branching, also called multiple leader, results in multiple growth of the main trunk as the branches grow and enlarge in diameter. Narrow angles of branch attachment will result in limb breakage and major trunk damage when the limb splits away. You can observe this on many types of trees growing in our area. Co-dominant branching is all too common on one of our native street trees, the laurel oak.

Poor pruning to correct these weak branch structures can also result in problems such as open heartwood, disease and weak, hollow trees.

Street trees should be selected to maintain a small size when power lines are overhead. Poor tree species selection and placement results in branches growing into power lines, creating potential problems. These problems can be prevented through proper plant selection and tree training during early growth. However, once the hazard develops, corrective pruning or tree removal may be the only safe solution.

Proper pruning promotes tree health, while removing dead, diseased and unsafe limbs. Guidelines outlined in the University of Florida's Community Tree Care help homeowners and landscape maintenance personnel train young trees to become safe as beautiful mature specimens. Call the Osceola County Extension Service at (321) 697-3000 for more information on pruning and tree care.

Hazard-tree problems mean liability for homeowners, cities, and the county. Proper maintenance can reduce the possibility of serious and costly damage in the event of a major storm. Be on the safe side and hire a trained, licensed professional to help you identify tree hazards and correct them.
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