

Reducing Tree Damage In Future Storms

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Urban and Community Forestry Program



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When a major storm strikes, some landscape trees seem to be able to come through with only minor damage, while others suffer the loss of large limbs or sizable parts of their branching structure. In the worst cases, trees may be completely split in two or may have nothing left standing but a trunk. If a tree has been weakened by disease, there may be little that can be done to prevent major breakage or loss when the stresses of a storm occur. However, there are preventive measures that home and property owners can take to help their trees be stronger and more resistant to storm damage.

The Oregon Department of Forestry and the National Arbor Day Foundation offer these five suggestions for pruning a tree to promote the growth of strong branches:

1. Encourage good branch angles. For most deciduous or hardwood trees, narrow angles between branches signal a point of future weakness, whether in the trunk or in the crown of the tree. This happens because as two branches grow closely together, neither has sufficient space to add the wood needed for strength. Instead, they grow against each other, creating a weak joint. To prevent this, remove one of the two branches when the tree is young. (see Illustration 1). The strongest branching angle in many deciduous tree species approximates 10 o'clock or 2 o'clock (see Illustration 2). Branches at those angles should be encouraged by removing other competing branches.

2. Encourage strong branch/trunk size relationships. The relative size of lateral (side) branches is also important in determining branch strength. Ideally, lateral branches should be no more than 1/2 to 3/4 the diameter of the trunk. Branches larger than that are often heavier than the trunk can support, and are candidates to break when wind, ice, or snow come along. Trees grow by adding new layers of wood on the trunk and branches each year. As the trunk grows, it will strengthen the joints with branches by adding wood around it, like a dowel in a chair leg.

3. Maintain a stable center of gravity. Wind, winter snow loads, or previous loss of a major limb can create situations where the tree's center of gravity is not positioned over the trunk. Then when a severe storm hits, a slight bit of extra weight or wind pressure can break limbs, snap the trunk off, or even topple the tree, roots and all. You can help reposition a tree's center of gravity by selectively removing branches on the leaning side and encouraging branches on the opposite side. (see Illustration 3)

4. Remove rubbing branches, suckers, watersprouts, and temporary branches. Branches that rub against each other can produce wounds and decay, so one of the offending branches should be removed. Watersprouts and suckers are abnormal growth that can occur at the base of the tree or inside the crown. They are rapidly growing, weakly attached, and upright branches that do not follow the tree's normal growth pattern (see Illustration 4). Temporary branches grow low on the tree when it is young and protect young bark from injury by the sun. After a tree is three to four years old, these temporary branches should be gradually removed. Because leaves are vital in providing the tree with nourishment, never remove more than one-third of a tree's leafy crown when pruning.

5. Don't cut branches back to stubs. Often people have the mistaken idea that long natural limbs on a tree will break more easily in a storm, and should be cut back to make them stronger. Just the opposite is the case. When a branch is cut back to a stub, new branches will grow from the edges of the stub. Because they cannot form a strong union with the stubbed branch, these new branches are even more likely to be broken in a future storm. If a branch needs to be removed, cut it back to a main branch or to the tree's trunk. Never leave a stub (see Illustration 5) on a branch or at the top of the tree. Trees that are topped are more likely to break in future storms.

If care is taken to keep landscape trees healthy, storm damage can be reduced. Trees are an important part of any home landscape, providing shade, beauty, clean air, and increased property value. Keeping your trees healthy is a wise investment.

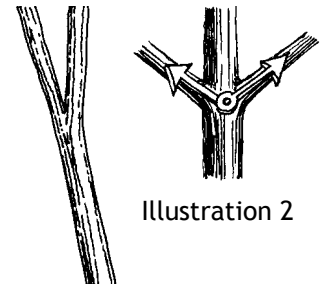


Illustration 1

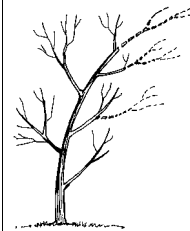


Illustration 3

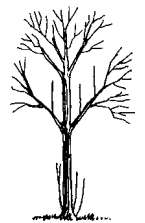


Illustration 4



Illustration 5

MORE INFORMATION:

This bulletin is produced by the Oregon Department of Forestry's Urban and Community Forestry Assistance Program, which helps Oregonians understand the value of trees in our communities and helps cities maximize the economic, environmental, and social benefits of the trees where we live. This bulletin was produced in cooperation with the USDA Forest Service, the National Arbor Day Foundation, and the International Society of Arboriculture. For additional information on urban forestry and tree care, visit the following websites:

www.pnwisa.org
www.arborday.org
www.treesaregood.com

