

Help Your Trees Weather Winter Storm Damage

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This winter, the ice, snow and wind have taken their toll on our landscape (as well as our backs from all the shoveling). While damage to our trees is not as widespread as what occurred during in the 1998 ice storm, many are showing broken branches and tops as evidence of their winter battle scars.

It's amazing to realize that trees live out their existence in one location, gathering everything they will ever need from their immediate surroundings for decades and even centuries. They hold up against high winds, heavy snows, bitter cold and drought as they stand resolute year after year. Trees are tough, but they do suffer damage, experience decline and eventually die. Right now is a good time to evaluate your trees for signs of disease, decay and damage.

According to the USDA Forest Service, healthy, mature trees add an average of 10 percent to a property's value. Trees can also reduce our energy costs: shading and cooling our homes in the summertime then letting in sunshine and buffering cold winds in the winter. They filter our air and water, sequester carbon, and provide homes and food for wildlife.

While healthy trees can enhance your property values, diseased and damaged trees can become liabilities.

Recent storms have resulted in many broken branches and tops. Unlike a person, when a tree is injured or damaged, it cannot heal its wounds. Instead trees react to an injury by sealing off damaged areas in a process called compartmentalization. When a tree is wounded - whether from a plow blade, breakage in a storm, or insect activity - it creates boundaries around the impacted area to stop the spread of disease and decay, and then continues to grow.

Broken branches often cause large, jagged wounds and tears that are difficult for a tree to seal off. By correctly pruning these damaged limbs, you can help your trees by enhancing their capability to seal over their wounds more quickly and successfully.

So what is pruning?

Pruning is the selective removal of parts of a plant, to improve the plant's overall performance.

We prune trees for a variety of reasons including: to remove safety hazards, to improve the health and vigor of the tree, and to improve the aesthetics of the landscape.

Pruning for safety involves removing branches that could fall and cause injury or property damage and cutting back branches that may interfere with visibility and utilities along roadways.

Pruning for health involves removing diseased or insect-infested wood, thinning the crown to increase air flow and reduce some pest problems, and removing crossed and competing branches. It can be used to encourage trees to develop a strong structure and reduce the likelihood of damage during severe weather.

Pruning for aesthetics involves enhancing the natural form and character of tree or stimulating flower production.

Pruning can save you time and money by minimizing future maintenance costs.

For most trees, it is best to prune in the late winter or early spring while they are still dormant. At this time of year, it is also easier to see the structure of the tree. There is less of a risk of transmitting diseases and attracting insects to your pruning cuts, and less sap will flow from the wound.

According to the Forest Service, pruning cuts should be made so that only branch tissue is removed and the stem tissue is not damaged. While you want to target your cuts so that you are not leaving branch stubs that extend too far; you also want to avoid cutting flush against the trunk of the tree. Locating your cuts correctly will help the tree seal off the consequent wound to protect itself.

Lastly, many people ask if they should use tree paint to seal over their pruning cuts. We don't recommend painting tree wounds. Research has shown that painting does not prevent decay and can actually interfere with a tree's natural efforts to protect itself.

If you have questions about pruning your trees, or would like to receive a tree pruning fact sheet, please contact UNH Cooperative Extension at 447-3834.

(Much of the information presented here has been adapted from the USDA Forest Service)

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