



Repairing Storm Damage to Trees and Shrubs

With a few exceptions, I would guess that most of us in the southwestern part of the state experienced damage to our trees and shrubs from January's ice storm. Everywhere I drive I see evidence of the storm: broken, jagged branches, leaning tree trunks and bent-over birches with their tops still brushing the ground. Many people may not want to wait for spring's arrival to attempt clean-up. Knowing what your options are may help you plan ahead.

The first step is to assess your situation and decide what needs to be done and by whom. Most large trees will need to be handled by professional tree services. Homeowners do not have the equipment or the training to remove large limbs themselves. Some large branches can weigh over 2,000 pounds, and incorrect handling can cause injury. Leave such jobs to reputable, insured professionals.

The practices listed below serve as guidelines in supervising the work of professionals or in performing the work yourself on small trees.

Selecting a professional: this spring it won't be uncommon for people to show up at your door offering their services to remove or repair trees. As one urban forester says, "They seem to come out of the woodwork – people we have never even heard of before." Do not be a victim. Make sure you use only professionals who:

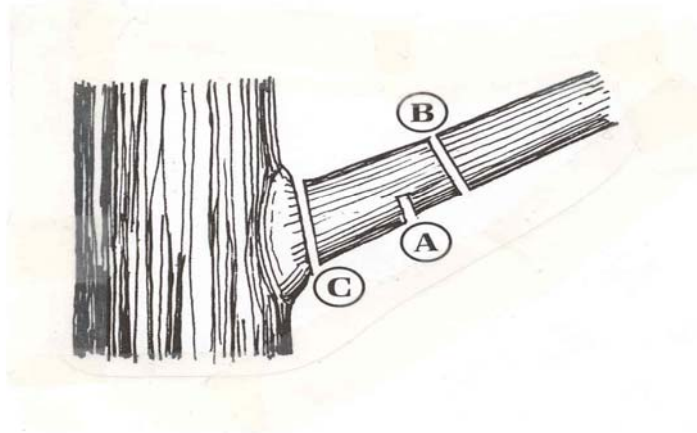
- are part of an established business in the community or nearby area, and who are working for the company, not moonlighting
- have a listing in the phone book, usually under Tree Service
- are fully insured for property damage, personal liability and worker compensation
- ideally are members of a professional association of arborists. The New Hampshire Arborists Association has a listing of certified tree care professionals on their web site: <http://www.nharborists.org/>.

If possible, get more than one estimate and ask for local references. In cases of removals, have a clear understanding about who removes the limbs and debris from the property, and if the price includes stump grinding or removal and clean-up. Your tree will have value as firewood or chips, either to you or if sold to others and this should be considered in the estimate.

How to prune storm-damaged trees: cutting flush against a larger limb or the trunk was once considered the best way to prune. We now know that this method is improper because it weakens a tree's natural defense against the invasion of disease organisms. The possibly harmful effects of pruning wounds can be minimized by making all cuts just to the outside of the raised areas at branch intersections. These features are called bark ridges (above) and branch collars (beneath).

Removing the jagged remains of broken limbs is the most common repair homeowners can make after a storm. Done properly, it will minimize the risk of decay pathogens entering the tree. Following good pruning techniques cut off limb stubs where they join the next largest branch or the trunk. Do not simply cut just below the break.

Because of its weight a large limb could tear loose during pruning, stripping bark and creating jagged edges that invite insects and disease. That won't happen if you follow these steps: a) cut part way through the branch from beneath at a point one or two feet from the trunk, b) make a second cut on top of the branch, several inches out from the first cut, and c) complete the job by making a final cut next to the trunk, just outside the branch collar – with the lower edge farther away from the trunk than the top.



How to repair torn bark: torn or stripped bark is the result of limbs being violently broken from the tree by wind or by branches falling from above. To improve its appearance and eliminate hiding places for insects, carefully use a chisel or sharp knife to smooth ragged edges of dead or dying bark. Remove the bark back to the point at which it is attached to the tree. Try not to expose any more cambium (inner bark).

Shaping the tear into an ellipse has more aesthetic value than effect on wound closure. Should you use this traditional method, round the ends to prevent dieback of the cambium at these points. Keep the wound as narrow as you can to hasten wound closing.

Wound dressings: wound dressings are not needed for the tree to recover from an injury or pruning cut. They do not prevent decay and do not keep out insects. Dr Alex Shigo, an authority on tree pruning and wounding, did a 13-year study on wound dressings. He found that most of the treatments did not seal any better than leaving the tree alone. Some of the products actually damaged the tree and made the decay problems even worse. Roofing tar, shellac or paint will damage the tree, as well.

Trees that break up severely or trees with serious trunk splits should be removed, especially if they present hazards or have little landscape value. Valuable trees can be repaired and strengthened using a technique called cabling and bracing. For large tree pruning and extensive damage repair, consider the services of a reputable professional tree service.

Evergreens often become heavily laden with snow and ice, and are more susceptible to damage than deciduous trees. If branches are not broken, it's best to let the snow and ice melt so the evergreens regain their shape naturally. An attempt to restore bent branches to shape while still frozen and brittle may cause them to break. Stakes or guy wires can be installed in the spring if evergreens do not return to their normal shape. Light roping may be used spirally around plants to hold them together or protective structures may be used over them to prevent buildup from ice and snow.

Finally, to further protect your real estate investment, take pictures of trees and shrubs every few years just in case you do experience storm damage. Pictures will serve as evidence for insurance claims or for an income tax deduction (casualty loss).

Margaret Hagen, Jan 2007

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