

Caring for Storm-damaged trees

The howling winds and heavy snows of Winter Storm Riley broke branches and uprooted trees. Now that professional crews have cleared debris from utility lines, you may need to assess the damage to your landscape. How do you know which trees you can save, which you can remove, and when to call a professional?

If utility lines are involved, leave it to the professionals: utility crews and arborists certified to work on or around power lines have the training and equipment to handle these life-threatening situations.

You'll also want to contact a professional for large trees, limbs or trunks that are hanging or leaning on another tree or structure, or split branches or trunks. How big is too big? A good rule of thumb is that if the tree requires a ladder or climbing equipment to prune, leave it to a professional. If you can prune it with both feet on the ground, you're probably safe.

If structural damage or damage to automobiles has occurred, talk to your insurance company. They may cover some of the removal.

If the tree is small enough to reach from the ground with a saw or pole pruner, the first thing to do is assess the damage. If you remove the badly damaged branches, will your tree still serve its purpose in your landscape? Sometimes even badly misshapen trees can still provide shade or spring blooms. If there is enough left to work with, consider these steps. Re-prune rough and shredded branch wounds as soon as safely possible after damage: just like us, clean cuts heal faster. Do not leave branch stubs or stumps. Resist the temptation to use a wound sealant: they are no longer recommended as they may actually slow the healing of wounds. In spring, when the tree leafs out, inspect again for dead branches. Then prune as you normally would, removing dead, rubbing and crossing branches, and lastly pruning for shape.

Is your tree leaning over with half of its roots out of the ground? Though tempting, it is hard to save a partially uprooted tree. Resettling and guying a leaning tree works best with small trees (like fruit or flowering trees) and generally requires heavy equipment. As soon as safely possible, cover the exposed roots with wet burlap sacks or wet mulch to prevent them from drying. When weather conditions allow, dig a hole on the uprooted side of the tree large enough to accommodate all of the exposed roots. Pad the bark and use heavy equipment to lift the tree slowly back into position. After resettling the tree with soil, use padded guywires and stakes to stabilize the trunk. Mulch well and water throughout the growing season. In some cases, you may need to leave the supports indefinitely, checking each year to be sure they do not chafe or "choke" the tree.

For more information on winter weather safety and salvaging storm-damaged trees, visit Cornell Cooperative Extension of Putnam County at putnam.cce.cornell.edu or call the Horticulture Hotline and Diagnostic Lab 9 a.m. to Noon weekdays (845) 278-6738