

Hurricanes and Trees

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After Hurricane Charlie, I became aware of the importance of some recommendations that I have made in the past and some new recommendations that could help in the future. Some of my previous recommendations that have taken on more importance since the storm are;

- 1) Don't plant large trees near power lines or houses.
- 2) The more diverse the plant palette (right now I am thinking specifically of trees) the better.

Considering all of the damage that occurred in Orlando from large trees falling on houses and power lines I realized how important that first recommendation is. We have a large variety of small growing trees that can be planted under power lines so that roadsides can still be attractive.

When a tree falls, or breaks up, it is more likely to damage a structure close to it than one farther away. If the landscape planning includes the use of trees to shade the house, some compromise will be necessary to avoid the shade trees turning into wreckers during a storm. It is more important to shade the east and west walls than the roof. Small trees could be planted fairly close to the house to accomplish this, and they would be much less hazardous than larger trees, even if the larger trees were farther away. Overhead utility lines are even more vulnerable to damage than the roof or windows of a house, and there should be no tree branches close enough to drop across them or even brush against them.

The second recommendation is important because if a variety of different trees (or plants) are used in a given area and an event occurs (like a hurricane) the likelihood of all the trees being destroyed is greatly reduced. Some of the established neighborhoods in Orlando had all live oaks planted which means some areas are most likely bare now. Nothing is sadder than going from a gorgeous, shady tree-lined road to one that is devoid of all trees with the blazing sun everywhere.

When an area has been without hurricane-strength winds for a number of years, there is a possibility of severe damage to trees and to the structures near them when a storm finally hits. Trees and shrubs can grow too massive or unbalanced to be able to stand windstorms, and it is worth learning how to prune and shape trees in order to minimize risks of damage.

This brings me to a new recommendation that I never thought about the long term importance of. Just a couple years ago I planted a Drake elm to the west side of our driveway to help shade the driveway in the summer. After planting it I watered it daily until it was established and then just sat back and watched it grow. I now look at that tree differently though, after Charlie went through. I now realize that I need to establish a regular system of pruning for that young Drake elm. Currently the tree is pretty dense and full and pruning is needed to develop a sturdy tree. So, my new recommendation is that after planting a new tree it should be pruned, as needed, through the first few years to establish a sturdy, well-spaced framework of healthy branches that create an open, leafy canopy that allows air to move freely.

There are some trees that are noted for dropping branches or splitting apart under stress but proper pruning can help reduce this risk. Just in case you have some of these trees in your yard and they haven't been pruned you may want to take note. Some of the trees known for brittle wood are;

Enterolobium cyclocarpum – ear tree

Eucalyptus spp. – eucalyptus

Grevillea robusta – silk oak

Hibiscus tiliaceus – sea hibiscus

Persea americana – avocado

Melia azedarach - Chinaberry

Another class of damage occurs when the whole tree blows over rather than breaking up. Species with shallow root systems include;

Araucaria heterophylla – Norfolk Island pine

Casuarinas pp. – Australian pine

Thespesia populnea – seaside mahoe

Now is a good time for everyone to take a look at the trees in their yard. You may have trees that need to be thinned out or even removed if they have decay and are near your home or power lines. It is much easier to take the time now to access your trees than clean up a huge mess after a big storm.