

Getting Your Yard Hurricane Ready

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**COOPERATIVE
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COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SCIENCES

The Atlantic hurricane season officially begins June 1, but named storms often form earlier. While actual hurricanes (storms with sustained winds above 74 mph) typically don't form until later in the season, they can. In 1908 the first hurricane formed in March and in 1938, the first hurricane formed January 3. During a storm season, there are more tropical storms (storms with sustained winds between 39 and 73 mph) than hurricanes. For the past seven seasons (2015 – 2021), there has been at least one named tropical storm that occurred prior to June 1. Both tropical storms and hurricane have the potential to cause significant damage. Here are some tips to minimize damage in your landscape if a tropical storm or hurricane makes landfall near you.

Planning Ahead

Preparing your landscape for hurricane season requires thinking ahead. To keep your yard and home safe when high winds come, keep hurricanes in mind when planning your gardens, planting new trees, and doing regular home maintenance. If your yard and home are well taken care of and wind resistance is considered, you will be in a much better place when storms do arrive.

Choosing and keeping the right trees and shrubs for your landscape is important for long term tree health and safety. Certain species or cultivars of plants, Bradford Pear for example, are inherently prone to failure. Removing them from the landscape or, better yet, never planting them in the first place, will significantly improve the chances of minimizing storm damage.

Choose plants that are size-appropriate for your landscape. Don't rely on excessive pruning to keep plants reduced to the desired size. Excessive pruning can lead to poor branch structure with weak branch attachment.

Look up as well as around when placing plants in the landscape. Never plant trees and larger shrubs under power or utility lines. Utility companies have the obligation and right to remove or reduce the size of plants interfering with their lines. The work typically is done by subcontractors, and all do not have the experience and/or knowledge to do it correctly. Many times the offending trees are simply cut off several feet below the utility lines. This practice of 'hat-racking' or 'topping' creates more problems than it solves. The often vigorous regrowth is weakly attached to the main trunk and branches and is very wind susceptible.

Routine Maintenance

Routine maintenance on your trees and shrubs can prevent undue damage to home and property. Regardless of the strength of the storm, a hurricane is very likely to tear off any dead, decaying or damaged branches which could become projectiles and cause damage. Properly prune plants by removing unhealthy branches in late winter or spring. Just before a hurricane is not the time to prune unless you have some place to dispose of the plant debris which otherwise could become dangerous projectiles. If you have fruit-bearing plants in your landscape, consider harvesting fruit prior to a hurricane, because even a small fruit can become a dangerous projectile at high wind speeds.

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All plants benefit from regular maintenance and pruning, but do not confuse ‘hurricane pruning’ with maintenance. Hurricane pruning, especially on palms (Figure 1), involves the process of removing the majority of leaves with the mistaken idea that the plant will become more wind resistant, when in fact it becomes more susceptible to storm damage. Over-pruning significantly reduces the plants’ ability to produce the food (sugars) produced by photosynthesis.



Figure 1. Palm tree that has been “hurricane pruned” and is now more susceptible to wind.

Do not attempt to remove large limbs (anything you cannot lift by hand) and entire trees yourself. If you need power equipment, consider leaving that work to a professional, qualified tree-care company. Tree-care firms are busiest in the spring and summer and may not have time to do your work at the last minute.

If you wait until a storm has formed, you probably have waited too late. Waiting too late leaves little time to check the qualifications of the tree care company. (http://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/media/sfylifasufledu/leon/image/How-to-Hire-a-Tree-Service_MT-edit.pdf.)

Property Preparation

Check the drainage in your yard and slope any mulching and fill away from your home to minimize the risk of flooding or foundation damage. Check any storm drains, culverts, and water retention areas, cleaning up debris or litter so storm water can flow as quickly and easily as possible. Turn off your irrigation system a few days prior to a storm’s arrival. Most storms and hurricanes are accompanied by significant amounts of rainfall. Wet soils do not grip the plant roots as well as dry soil can and lead to trees falling during and even after the storms.

Check all gutters and downspouts to be sure they’re firmly attached to your home and clear of debris and clogs. Be sure the slope of downspouts is appropriate to keep water draining, and use splash guards or downspout extensions to move excess water away from your home’s foundation.

Remove all tools, furniture, potted plants and decorations from your yard before a storm. Secure small, loose items in a shed or garage. These items, if left out, can become projectiles. Larger items that cannot be brought inside should be secured or firmly staked down. Close and secure any shed or outbuilding doors.

Do not drain your pool. High soil water levels actually can ‘float’ a pool causing it to heave and rise above the existing grade. Water weighs nearly eight pounds per gallon and will hold the pool in place.

Hurricanes can be a stressful time for homeowners, but with a little planning, you can minimize the dangers and risks to people and property.