Avoid tree damage from winter storms

Source: Bill Fountain, professor, UK Department of Horticulture

It’s winter, and in Kentucky that means your trees and shrubs may be coated at some point with a thick layer of wet, heavy snow or ice. This may cause branches to bend or even break, which could result in property damage, disrupt electrical service or harm people.

Refrain from hitting ice and snow-covered shrubs with a broom or shaking them to release the weight of the snow or ice. The liquids within the stems are probably frozen. Moving the stems can cause ice crystals to break and damage the plant’s conductive tissues, so the plant will not be able to move water from the roots to the foliage when spring comes. Letting the snow and ice melt gradually is usually best. Trees and shrubs that do not immediately spring back to their original upright habit will often do so with time.

Freezing rain is an occasional problem that is best dealt with before winter. Fast-growing trees have softer wood that is more prone to breakage. Multi-trunked trees have more branches toward the outside that result in uneven loading. When this is coupled with more surface area for ice to adhere, you have a prescription for failure. Needled evergreens and broadleaf evergreen trees and shrubs collect more ice and wet snow and break under heavy loading. Examples of broadleaf evergreens include southern magnolia, evergreen hollies and rhododendron. Prune English ivy from deciduous trees. It can grow into the tree canopy, collect ice and snow and cause the tree to fail.

When pruning plants, do not remove too much interior growth. Removing too many of the interior branches can result in more damage from wind-loading. Rounding-over shrubs like crape myrtle, forsythia and spirea results in an abundance of shoots at the end of the pruned stem. These shoots collect more ice and wet snow resulting in more damage than if the shrub had been left unpruned. When it is time to remove old, poorly flowering stems, cut them to the ground leaving only a 3-inch stem. Remove only a third of the old stems each year to maintain the desirable form of the plant. This allows the plant to produce vigorous, new shoots and keeps it from looking leggy.

Dense shrubs, such as yews or junipers, may split in the middle, leaving an unattractive donut-shape. These plants cannot be pruned to repair the damage. It is best to remove them and plant something else.

Get advice on trees from an International Society of Arboriculture-Certified Arborist. Log onto https://www.treesaregood.org/. Enter your location, and you will immediately receive a list of ISA Certified Arborists in your area. You can also select arborists who have the ISA Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ) credential. Individuals trained in tree risk assessment can provide you with a risk rating and help you understand your tolerance for risk. Good tree care isn’t expensive, poor tree care is.

For more information, contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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