Trees After the Storm: Remove, Repair or Replace?

Storms can affect trees in many ways, flooded soils that fail, winds that break and twist limbs, ice that weighs down branches, torn bark, and defoliation can occur in a range from 'barely noticeable' to 'can this tree survive'. But trees can recover from a storm, depending on the kind of damage and its severity. So before making a final decision to remove a tree, there are some questions to consider. While the best option is to have a certified arborist make an assessment, a professional experienced in working with trees and their response to pruning and injury, a homeowner can also make some observations that can help make a decision.

STEP 1: ASSESS THE DAMAGE

1. **Other than the storm damage, is the tree basically healthy and vigorous?**
   If the tree is basically healthy, is not creating a hazard, and did not suffer major structural damage, it will generally recover if first aid measures are applied immediately after the storm.

2. **Are major limbs broken?**
   The larger a broken limb is, the harder it will be for the tree to recover from the damage. If a majority of the main branches are gone, the tree may have little chance of surviving.

3. **Has the leader (main upward-trending branch) been lost?**
   In species where a leader is important to upward growth or desirable appearance, it may be a judgment call. The tree may live without its leader, but it may be a stunted or deformed version of its former self.

4. **Is at least 50 percent of the tree's crown (branches and leaves) still intact?**
   This is a good rule of thumb for tree survivability. A tree with less than half its branches remaining may not be able to produce enough foliage to nourish the tree through another season.

Immediately after a storm:

If a tree is not an immediate risk, make sure it receives continued care. Typically, it's fine to wait a few weeks or months before making a final decision about the fate of the tree.

If a tree requires immediate attention, hire a qualified arborist. Arborists are especially important when a tree is leaning against wires, structures or other trees, if utility lines or structures are endangered or if a chainsaw is required.

5. **How big are the wounds where branches have been broken or bark has been damaged?**
   The larger the wound is, in relation to the size of the limb, the less likely it is that the tree can cover it with wound wood, leaving the tree vulnerable to disease and pests. On a tree with a healthy tree canopy, a two- to three-inch wound on a 12-inch diameter limb can seal over with new bark within a couple of years.

6. **Are there remaining branches that can form a new branch structure?**
   The remaining limbs will grow more vigorously as the tree tries to replace its missing foliage. Look to see if branches are in a place that can eventually fill out or re-balance the tree's appearance.

7. **Is the tree a suitable species for its location?**
   If the tree is in the wrong location (such as a potentially tall tree beneath a power line) or an undesirable species for the property (messy fruit, etc.), then it may be best to remove it now and plant a more suitable tree is a good location.

Responding to storms requires several steps:

1) **Look and Assess** the situation.
2) **Prioritize** the work.
3) **Hire** a professional licensed in RI.
4) **Prepare** for the future with proper pruning and tree management.

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STEP 2: MAKE THE DECISION

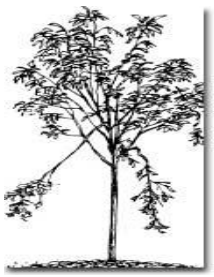
In general, the answer about what to do with a particular tree falls into one of three categories:

A. IT'S A KEEPER

If damage is relatively slight, you can prune broken branches, repair torn bark or rough edges around the wounds and let the tree begin to repair itself.

An Easy Call: A mature shade tree can usually survive the loss of one major limb. The broken branch should be pruned back to the trunk. In the months to follow, large wounds should be closely monitored for signs of decay.

Minor Damage: Although the tree has been damaged, enough strong limbs may remain on a basically healthy tree to make saving it possible.



Too Young to Die: Young trees can sustain quite a bit of damage and still recover quickly, If the leader is intact and the structure for future branching remains, remove the damaged limbs and allow the tree to recover.

B. WAIT AND SEE

If a valuable tree appears to be a borderline case, resist the temptation to rush through the process and just cut the tree down. Remember, time is on your side. Carefully prune broken branches and then give the tree some time to recover. A final decision can be made later.

Easy Does It:
Resist the temptation to prune too heavily. Remember that the tree will need all the foliage it can produce in order to make it through the next growing season. Remove only the damaged limbs, wait and see what happens.

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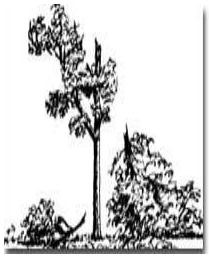
Hold Off: A healthy mature tree can recover even when several major limbs are damaged. With large trees, a *professional arborist* should be brought in to assess damage on a borderline situation, and to safely accomplish needed pruning

C. SAY GOODBYE

Some trees simply can't be saved or they're not worth saving. If the tree already has been weakened by disease, if the trunk is split or more than 50 percent of its leaves are gone, then the tree likely won't make it.

Tree Tragedy: This otherwise healthy young tree has lost too much of its crown—the leafy head that is vital for survival. It will probably not be able to grow enough new branches and leaves to provide needed nourishment and will never be able to regain its former beautiful shape.



Hopeless Case: About all that's left of this tree is its trunk. The few remaining branches can't provide enough foliage to enable the tree to make it through another growing season.

Farewell to a Friend: A rotten inner core in the trunk or structural weakness in branching patterns can cause a split trunk—the tree equivalent of a heart attack. The wounds are too large to ever mend, and the tree has lost its sap lifeline between roots and leaves. This tree is all but dead.

STEP 3: DON'T DO IT ALONE

Some of your trees may have damage that's too close to call. Or you may have hidden damage. In these cases, a tree professional may be needed to help you decide what to do. Don't hire just anyone who shows up at your door after a storm; look for licensed and certified Arborists.