

Trees After the Storm: Planning Your Response

Not All Trees Need to Be Cut Down! Hurricanes, ice, snow, tornadoes, and strong thunderstorms are some of the natural disasters that impact our trees. When storms damage trees, cleanup and recovery can seem overwhelming, especially when all the other impacts of the storm that must be addressed at the same time, to get the community functioning normally again.

A common reaction after a storm is to remove even undamaged trees to avoid future problems, particularly if a tree has fallen on a home or other valued property. However, the first thing to remember when you look at your trees is: these trees already survived. The storm provided a stress test for trees which many failed; but the ones that survived have proven their resilience.

Trees serve many purposes but they can also protect us. Though a tree *may* fall in a hurricane,

it may also shelter your home from your neighbor's falling tree – or his airborne lawn chair. Rather than removal of sound, or even somewhat damaged trees, many can be treated and pruned to maintain the benefits they provide. Reserve removal for those trees that are too damaged.

And don't make that decision alone, a professional arborist can evaluate the condition of your trees after a storm. Armed with the knowledge gained from a professional, the most appropriate treatment decision can be made.

And if you are tempted to cut down an undamaged or sound tree anyway, remember that falling branches are more common than falling trees. Proper pruning can substantially reduce the likelihood of branch failure, reduce your concerns and maintain a sound tree that will withstand the next storm.

Responding to tree damage after a storm, the tree owner, whether a homeowner or a municipality, should follow several steps:

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



Look and Assess

Even though the damage and debris can give a sense of urgency to getting things cleaned up as quickly as possible, assessing the immediate needs and prioritizing them can help focus on the situations that require immediate concern. Whether you are a community or a homeowner:

- 1) Primary Priority: safety – utilities, roads, hangers or leaning trees over target areas (roads, buildings, utilities, etc.).
- 2) Secondary Priority: affected trees which can be avoided, detoured or cordoned off.

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Look up and look down to assess the situation. Be on the alert for downed power lines, hanging branches that look like they're ready to fall, and leaning trees. Downed utility lines, or trees/limbs that have fallen or hanging over a power line, should be reported to utility companies or 911 operators. And never use pruning equipment near utility lines, leave that to the professionals. Storm damage cleanup can be very dangerous, even for professionals. Make safety a priority.

Prioritize

The most important priority is to determine if the tree poses a safety risk to humans or animals or is endangering property.

TREES WITH HIGHER PRIORITY

- Damaged public trees and trees affecting high traffic areas
- Trees or branches hanging over powerlines (only qualified line clearance arborists should work near electrical utilities)
- Trees or branches blocking roads or driveways

TREES WITH LOWER PRIORITY

- Fallen to the ground and will not fall any further
- Fallen trees not blocking roads or driveways
- Damaged trees located in low traffic areas



Hire the Right Professionals

It can be tempting to try and save money by contracting with the cheapest company to do your cleanup, especially when the quotes increase due to the post-storm demand. That is why it is advisable for communities to have established relationships or agreements with certified arborists or tree care professionals. Then, when a storm hits, you'll likely be prioritized as an existing customer.

The same can be said for homeowners who, otherwise, might be inclined to save money and do some clean-up on their own. But, when you assess the situation and prioritize what is needed, it should be very clear what you can handle – anything not on the ground should definitely be handled by a professional. Some situations and tree damage could be a threat to your life, so it makes more sense to spend the money to have the work done safely and reliably.

Who is a professional?

After a storm, it is not uncommon for people claiming to be tree specialists to arrive offering services and say things like they happen to be in the neighborhood, just did some work down the street, or noticed your tree. Many of these individuals have little to no training and are simply out to make a quick profit. Legitimate arborists have the expertise to properly assess your storm damaged tree and carry out the work. Rarely do they need to go door-to-door.

Here are five questions to guide you in finding qualified tree-care specialists:

- **Is the person part of an established community business?** Check for a reputable website or phone number. Online reviews may also be helpful.

- **Has the person provided evidence that they are regularly employed with the company?** Some specialists work as independent contractors and have a limited relationship with the company they claim as their employers.
- **Is the person up-to-date on certification and insurance and RI Licensure?** Ask for current certificates of insurance for property damage, personal liability and worker's compensation.
- **Is the person qualified with a professional association?** Documentation as certified (ISA) or consulting (ASCA) arborist or a business accredited through TCIA is more important than membership, as the individuals or businesses are involved in professional organizations and, as such, work to their standards.
- **Is the person offering a competitive price?** If possible, obtain more than one estimate to ensure that the price offered is comparable with competitors. Clarify whether the price includes removal and clean-up. Do not offer or give payment before the work is completed.

What will a professional do?

Certain situations are best handled by professional arborists:

- Remove a leaning tree or a tree resting on another tree or structure
- Reaching limbs that require climbing
- Pruning broken limbs above houses
- Restoring damaged trees that can be saved



Professional Arborists consider many factors when assessing a tree:

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| • Amount of Damage | • Tree Health | • Site Conditions |
| • Tree Size and Age | • Tree Structure | • Value to Owner |
| • Tree Species | • Past Pruning History | |



Storm damaged trees typically recommended for removal:

- Lower main trunk is cracked or broken
- Large stem has split from tree
- Tree is newly leaning towards a target
- Remaining structure prone to breakage
- Major roots are severed or broken
- Majority of large limbs are broken

Storm damaged trees may be considered for restoration:

- Tree is young or recently planted
- Canopy is simply defoliated
- Only small branches are broken
- Species is known as decay-resistant
- Only a few major limbs are broken



The benefits that mature trees provide are much greater than those of a newly planted tree. Restoration of storm damaged trees is preferred over removal and replacement. Depending on the type and extent of damage, candidates for restoration may require one or multiple visits by a licensed arborist to perform necessary pruning. Proper pruning cuts will help guide the tree back to a desirable form and a strong structure so that benefits will be reestablished more quickly than waiting for a new tree to reach maturity.

Prepare

Besides establishing a relationship with a certified professional or company, let them develop a relationship with your trees. Routine and periodic pruning to promote strong branch attachments and good form will reduce the likelihood of major damage to trees. Pruning practices that a Professional Arborist should perform include:

- Remove dead, dying, diseased, damaged, and decayed branches
- Encourage good branch angles
- Develop or maintain a dominant leader
- Remove branches with included bark

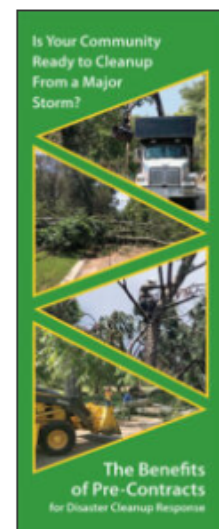
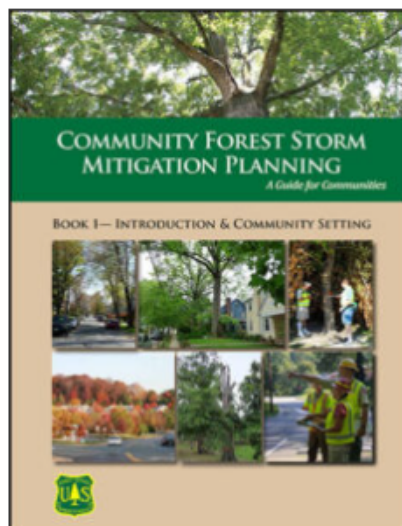
Before the next storm, visit these websites to gather information you will need after the storm.

- [RI Licensed Arborists](https://dem.ri.gov/urban-forestry/find-ri-arborists) - <https://dem.ri.gov/urban-forestry/find-ri-arborists>
- [Ice Storms](https://dem.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur861/files/programs/bnatres/forest/pdf/urban/storm-tree-ice.pdf) - <https://dem.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur861/files/programs/bnatres/forest/pdf/urban/storm-tree-ice.pdf>
- [Hurricane Recovery Program Series](https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/collections/series_urban_forest_hurricane_recovery_program) - https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/collections/series_urban_forest_hurricane_recovery_program

Additional Municipality Preparation

Before the next storm, municipalities should review their Emergency Management Plan as well as their Storm Mitigation Plan to make any necessary updates and to carry out mitigation activities. If your community does not have a storm mitigation plan, visit the RI Division of Forest Environment's Urban and Community Forestry webpages to review the available planning resources:

[Community Emergency Planning](#)



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