

After the Storm

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

The December 15th windstorm will be one for the record books. Not only were the late afternoon/early evening windstorm incredible, but the amount of wind that the area endured and for the length of time that it blew gave us inlanders a taste of what it's like to go through a hurricane! In spite of all the problems that came out of this storm there is one silver lining. Had this occurred when trees were full leaved, we'd still be chainsawing our way out of it!

One thing that an event like this gives us the chance to do is to evaluate trees in our yards and community. As a county extension agent I have developed some weird hobbies over the years. One of those is to study lightning strike damage and storm damage (all kinds of storms) to trees. Nothing that I have seen following this storm has surprised me. The only actual surprise I had was that there wasn't more damage! Let's take a little time to break down and analyze some of the damage I saw to trees.

Small branches, especially on any evergreen, are easily broken off of trees, especially with winds of this speed. Likewise, we saw quite a few evergreens (eastern red-cedars) that failed. This makes sense given the fact that evergreens still have their foliage which creates more surface area for the wind to push against. Quite a few of the cedars that I saw down had internal decay which weakens the trunk of any tree. Something else to keep in mind is that when a wind storm blows through a town, the wind gets channeled and funneled around and between buildings which causes strange wind currents and eddies and can also accelerate the speed of the wind in something known as the wind tunnel effect. These eddies caused twisting on some trees which then tightens up the wood and makes it more likely to break as additional wind currents hit the tree.

Deciduous trees didn't escape without damage either. In virtually all trees that I've seen to date there has been decay that weakened the structural integrity of the tree. Some trees are very poor at walling off injury and subsequently decay. Trees that are near streets may have had roots cut in street widening projects. These roots may then have died leaving no support or anchor on the street side of the tree. I saw several ash and hackberry trees go down that had internal decay. For hackberry and silver maple this often comes from poor pruning (topping) or removal of large limbs that leaves an open avenue for decay organisms. Ash trees often have damage as small trees from the ash/lilac borer. This damage is the start of a decay process that may occur unseen for decades until some kind of stress impacts the trees. Remember, trees (all plants in fact) react to the environment that they are growing in and the care that they are given. Inappropriate actions on that tree today may not become obvious for decades.

This event needs to be a wake up call for homeowners. No one can ever predict when a tree will fail (fail meaning it blows over or a major limb breaks out of it.) Tree experts (arborists) can evaluate trees and look for warning signs. Trees with multiple warning signs need to be considered for removal and replacement. Sometimes, perfectly fine looking trees will fail, but not often. Contact me or a certified arborist if you'd like to have an evaluation of your trees done in the coming months. If you need pruning work done after the storm you don't have to be in a hurry. If someone comes knocking on your door and offers to do the work tell them "NO!" Also remember that topping a tree is never an accepted pruning practice. In fact, it's a lingering death sentence to the tree!