

ASK THE AG TEAM, for the week of January 6, 2008

Repairing ice storm damage to trees –by *Tim Baker, Horticulture Specialist, University of Missouri Extension, Daviess County*

In my last column, I discussed some of the major decision points in evaluating ice storm damage to trees. I mentioned that especially when safety issues are involved, it would be good to use the service of a professional arborist, who has the knowledge and tools to deal with the situation.

But often the damage is minor, and the homeowner may opt to take care of the tree without professional assistance. That's fine, and this week, I would like to mention a few pointers that may help you as you restore the tree.

The first place to start is safety. Don't take risks. Think things through before you make any cuts. Consider not only what you are doing to the tree, but also your own safety.

Think about the shape of the tree and the need for balance. Also remember that your pruning should be done for the health of the tree. If limb breaks, for example, are left in place, they will provide possible entryways for insects and diseases.

If there is a lot of wood to be removed, start with the obvious problems and remove them first.

Very possibly, given the intensity of this year's ice storm, there may be large broken branches to deal with. If the breaks are out on the branch some distance, you may be able to leave the branch and prune at the break. But if the break is close to the trunk of the tree, you may need to remove the entire branch.

When you cut an entire branch off, it's wise to make two cuts, especially for a large branch. The first cut should be out some distance from the trunk, and the second cut will be at the trunk.

For the cut away from the trunk, first make a cut underneath the branch, about 1/3 of the way through the branch. Then cut down from the top to meet the underneath cut. If you just cut straight from the top, there is a tendency for the limb to fall, taking a strip of bark down the trunk of the tree with it. By cutting from the underneath side first, it helps eliminate this problem.

Next, you'll make the cut at the trunk. But don't make the cut flush with the trunk of the tree. Come out at least an inch or so, and make your cut there. That way, the branch collar will still be intact, and if the tree is healthy, it can grow new tissue and repair the pruning cut.

What about using pruning compounds on the cut? Generally, horticulturists do not advise using them. They are not necessary, and may even slow down the healing process in some instances.

Likewise, you sometimes see people using concrete in damaged parts of the tree, to fill in missing wood. Again, we like to discourage this practice. As the concrete ages, there will be cracks and gaps that develop. This is a good place for water to get in, and because the concrete is there, it can't dry out. This is another good situation for the growth of disease.

Sometimes, people want to take drastic measures to save their tree. I had a call after the storm from another specialist. The client in his county had a tree where the trunk had split evenly. He was wondering if he could somehow tighten up the tree to close the gap, and then put a large metal band of some sort to keep the tree together.

Again, I discouraged this idea. While the bark might eventually grow together, the wood inside the tree would never bond. In other words, the split would remain, and not heal. Eventually, the metal band would decay, and you would be back to the same problem, with perhaps disastrous results.

And that brings me back to my initial point. Be safe. In all your decisions, think safety, not only initially as you cut the tree, but on down the road as the tree ages.