Assessing Ice-Storm Damage to Trees in the Landscape
(Part One of a Two-Part Series)

The heavy snow and ice storms in December have left many landowners with serious headaches in terms of assessing tree damage both in the landscape and forest setting. The Watauga Cooperative Extension is working to help people understand how to assess tree damage and where to turn for help. This first of two articles will address ice storm damage to trees in the urban & landscape setting.

Safety should be the first priority when assessing tree damage and beginning the cleanup process. While many yards and landscapes are littered with limbs and treetops, there are also MANY more broken limbs and tops that are “hanging on by a thread”. These broken but not-yet-fallen limbs are a HUGE safety concern. Also, many trees may not show obvious signs of damage, yet may be cracked and hazardous still. When assessing trees, avoid venturing out into the woods on windy days and be mindful of potential hazards that may not be immediately obvious.

Tree recovery and repair is a two-step process beginning with immediate attention to address major structural damage to limbs and trunks. After major breaks are cleaned up, there may also be a need for additional corrective pruning—which might take several months or possibly years to restore the desired shape to the tree. If too much of the tree is removed all at once, this can lead to future problems of weak branches, suckering (multiple sprouts), and sunscald. Always resist the temptation to “top” trees or reduce large broken limbs to stubs, which promotes weak branching and weakens the overall health of the tree.

Broken or split branches should be pruned out of the tree as soon as possible. If over 50 percent of the main branches must be removed, it is questionable if the tree will be able to recover. Broken branches translates into a diminished amount of leaves the following spring. As the leaves develop and work to provide food for the tree, they will not likely be able to meet the nutritional needs. The larger a damaged branch is, the more difficult it will be for that tree to recover. Some tree species are more prone to ice damage and will generally not recover to a desirable level, including black locust, box elder, mulberry, poplar, silver maple, and Bradford pear. Also evaluate the overall health of the tree: does the tree have vigor and did it perform well last year? If not, then it is likely that severe damage to limbs and trunks will be too much stress for the tree to recover from.

A final word on pruning: it is extremely useful to remove weak, narrow-angled branches early in the life of the tree. These problematic branches are often the first to be damaged in heavy snow and ice, and by removing them as the tree develops you can concentrate growth into the healthy and structurally sound branches.
In some tree species it is important to have a central leader. Some common examples include persimmons, chestnuts, apples, pears, blue and Norway spruces. If the leader has been broken out of the tree, the habit, or growth pattern of the tree may be severely altered. While this alone may not affect the health of the tree, the tree may never achieve a desirable form. These types of damaged trees will have to be judged on a case-by-case basis.

Where branches have broken off from the trunk, it is helpful to assess the remaining wound on the tree. Wounds are entry points for disease and insect pests, and if there is uneven, jagged, or torn bark, it can be helpful to trim the wound's edges to promote healing. We're not talking about a carving heyday, but rather using a sharp knife to cut just outside the jagged bark edges to create a smooth line for the tree to heal from. If wounds are very large (relative to the size of the limb) they may never fully heal, providing a direct link into the tree for fungi, bacteria, and insects.

In nearly every situation, it is best to leave tree repair and removal to professional arborists. These are highly skilled individuals with both the knowledge and the equipment to handle trees safely and appropriately. Estimates on tree removal and repair vary widely. If smaller trees can be felled with no risks to structures or power lines, costs are lower—you can expect to pay between $75-150 per tree to have an average size tree cut down. However, if you have large, damaged trees that need to be pruned or removed, the arborist may have to climb the trees and take them down vertically (one piece at a time) at a substantially higher cost—$500 and up per tree depending on size and proximity to structures and power lines. Chipping, bucking (cutting into smaller logs/firewood), and removal will also add to the price tag. There are tree-care professionals and arborists from all over the eastern U.S. setting up shop to meet the high demand for tree cutting and removal. It would be wise to get several estimates from different tree-care professionals and ask if they’re insured before contracting them.

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