# Storm Damage: Forests & Trees

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High winds and saturated soils can result in damage to forest and yard trees. With Hurricane Florence approaching Virginia and the Carolina's, you may be wondering what to do.

Let's talk about trees in a forest first. Natural disasters such as hurricanes are a natural part of the environment. In many cases, if the forest is otherwise healthy and vigorous, damage may be limited to isolated pockets. In some cases however, extensive damage may result in financial loss, hazardous situations, and heartache at seeing your forest dramatically changed.

If, after the storm, you feel you have significant damage to your forest, your first call should be to your local Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF) office. They can provide preliminary assessments of loss and advise you on clean-up and/or salvage operations. These numbers may be useful when tax season rolls around to be able to claim casualty loss.

Timber salvage may be appropriate if you have high value timber on the ground or significantly damage standing timber. This option can help minimize financial loss and make the woods safer after the storm has passed. A storm damaged woodlot is very dangerous and should only be entered with extreme caution, proper protection gear and with experience. Even within the first year, hazards from fallen trees can make your forest a dangerous place.

If you have damage to trees in your yard, some of the same principals apply. Such as the need to determine the amount of damage and put a dollar value on it. The best way to determine the decrease in the fair market value of the property is with a complete appraisal. The fees for this are deductible under expenses incurred to determine tax liability. In some cases, clean-up, repair, and replacement costs on the damaged landscape may also be used. You should also review a copy of your homeowners insurance to know what your coverage is.

In terms of repairing the damage to your landscape, safety is again of utmost importance. The first thing many people do is grab the chain saw. If you only have small branches, (4" or less) use lopping shears and hand saws instead. An injury is the last thing you need after a disaster has hit and most chain saw injuries happen to fatigued homeowners.

If you decide to use a power saw wear proper protective equipment (eye protection, ear protection, hardhat, non-slip gloves, chain saw pants or chaps, heavy-duty boots and trim fitting clothes). Before starting the saw, make sure the chain is sharp (less tiring to use), and it is properly fueled and oiled. To start the saw, place it firmly on the ground with chain break engaged, one foot in the handle (if possible), one hand on the top of the handle, and pull the starter cord firmly with the other hand. "Drop starting" is the most dangerous way to start your saw, do not do it!

While cutting, make sure you have firm footing, don't reach above your shoulder to cut, saw with the lower part of the bar close the bumper, not on the top near the nose, avoid kickback by keeping the tip (upper ¼) of the blade free from twigs, branches and other debris.

Damage to small trees can often be easily corrected. Newly planted trees or shrubs, which are tilted, may be reset and staked. You may trim partially damaged trees or shrubs with proper pruning equipment and practices (go to: http://www.ext.vt.edu/resources/ for information on pruning and other landscape practices). If some plants are beyond repair, complete removal may be necessary. Deciduous trees and shrubs, however, will often sprout back in the spring if a clean cut is made close to the ground. Otherwise, you may want to use the opportunity to replace the plant with something different.

Lastly, extensive landscape damage sometimes necessitates the use of heavy equipment. As much as possible, don't allow heavy equipment to move close to the trunks of remaining shrubs or trees or the resulting root damage will cause loss in the coming years.

No matter if your trees are part of a forest or your landscape, it is very important to keep records! Inventories such as might be part of a forest management plan can be very useful in determining base values of forestland. Recent pictures of your mature landscaping might be important to verify "before damage" value. Keep receipts and copies of newspaper articles as evidence of the causality.

In closing, count your blessing if the only thing damaged in this year's storms can be tallied with dollar signs. Trees & shrubs can be replanted, a forest will regenerate, houses can be rebuilt, but a life lost cannot be recovered. Be safe and help others.

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