

## **Proper pruning before hurricane season a matter of common sense, by George Rogers, Ph.D. ( *Palm Beach Post*, May 6, 2007)**

My recent homeowners association newsletter reminded residents that H-season is approaching, and homeowners whose trees are not properly hurricane pruned will find themselves in the cone of uncertainty of Hurricane HOA. Ever-compliant, I pondered what constitutes proper hurricane pruning. It seems to boil down largely to common sense.

First of all, if a big dead branch looks it might crash onto something else vulnerable and valuable, precautions may be in order. Duh. When my wooden fence blows down, its flying pieces become a WMD. Only slightly more subtle is the question of removing healthy palm fronds. Horticulturists have been shouting...no! (Except maybe some who profit from providing this service.) Most palms are well designed for hurricanes but not for the trauma of amputating healthy fronds, which reduces the plant's photosynthetic capacity, weakens it, and invites disease. Of course, loose dead fronds are a horse of a different color. So are those towering Washingtonia palms threatening to snap off and crush screen porches below.

What about woody broadleaf trees? Maybe the first defense against hurricanes is species selection. Unfortunately these are often the more slow-growing species. Yet post-hurricane civilizations such as ours want our shade back quickly. So we're tempted to replace lost trees with fast-growing species, only to set the stage for more toothpicks in the next hurricane. Disposable trees. On average, native trees are best adapted to hurricanes. Some comparatively resistant selections seem (with room for debate!) to be: Live Oak, Pigeon Plum, Paradise Tree, Mango, Geigertree, Gumbo-Limbo, Holly, Autograph Tree, and Seagrape. Some achy-breaky-tippy types seem to be: Mahogany (!), Tabebuia (!), Benjamin Fig, African Tulip, Goldenrain Tree, Avocado, Bishopwood, and Glaucous Senna. Yes, I know, add your own favorite\_\_\_\_\_.

What about pruning those broadleaf trees? A quick pre-hurricane haircut to reduce the canopy might help but requires careful second thoughts. Who knows how much canopy reduction is required to achieve the desired effect? Probably quite a bit. There aren't exactly engineering standards available to look up, and every tree is different in characteristics and in circumstances. For some guidelines, check out UF publication "How to Minimize Wind Damage in the South Florida Garden" (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP042>).

Severe pruning as hurricanes threaten may be worse than doing nothing. Pruning stimulates bushy new growth, which will increase the wind resistance of the tree. Further, excessive pruning weakens the tree temporarily, which may precede the second whacking provided by the hurricane. Back-to-back whacks may be too much for the tree to bear. Did you notice how many trees never recovered from the recent hurricanes, or did so only reluctantly? "Lifting" the tree excessively with the idea of diminishing wind resistance may make the tree top-heavy and more tippy.