
About Trees: Wait-and-see attitude might be best for trees hit by lightning

By Fred Morgan

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The warm, wet, turbulent weather of spring and summer brings thunderstorms and lightning that can threaten the health, mechanical stability and life of your trees.

For the Mid-South, the most frequent targets are our large oaks. Because of their imposing size and height, they carry a lot of water aloft in their branches during the warm growing season. And we all know that water attracts and conducts electricity.

With lightning, the electrical charge finds a ground, or in this case, a tall elevated and water-filled tree. When the two meet, there is an instantaneous boiling and consequent explosion.

But as lightning strikes go, there appears to be no consistent pattern. One tree can be visibly torn up and still live for years. Another will exhibit little or no visible damage and turn brown within a month or so.

Lightning produces two kinds of damage. The first is mechanical damage, the kind that is easily seen and often creates hazardous situations that require immediate attention. This might mean a tree must be taken down, or that the damaged area be removed.

The second, and less obvious, class of damage from lightning is systemic. There may or may not be collateral mechanical damage. Often the only visible evidence may be one or two vertical debarked strips. These strips may be only an inch or so wide and may or may not extend to the ground.

But the super heat of the lightening can fry the tiny blond root hairs that are responsible for picking up water in the soil. When these critical tree parts are destroyed, the tree can no longer take up moisture and all the watering in the world won't help.

If a tree does not have to be taken down immediately because of mechanical damage, it may be prudent to wait to see if there is systemic damage.

Not all trees that are struck by lightning die. Quite a few survive and do well for years, even decades. But it can be difficult, if not impossible, to immediately tell which are which.

If a tree is struck in the summer and does not turn brown immediately or within a matter of weeks, it is smart to wait to see if it leafs out the following spring. If it comes back acceptably, then some repair including removing any loose bark and insecticidal applications to the exposed wounds will be recommended.

But jumping to conclusions too soon and authorizing premature repair work may be wasted effort and money if the tree is in process of a slow decline and death.

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