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The summer of '06 has certainly shaped up to be one of the hottest and driest in recent years. Scattered isolated thundershowers have brought some small amount of relief to areas of our county and across our region while leaving other areas as parched and dry as I can remember. Unfortunately, even with the good news of the welcomed thunderstorms and accompanying rainfall comes a negative aspect of summer rainstorms, lightening.

Most people don't realize just how dangerous lightening is and how often it strikes the earth. Humans have about a one in 50,000 chance (or so it is reported) of being struck by lightening. And, if my memory serves me correctly the Southeastern United States is the area of the world that is struck most often.

Quite often, lightening strikes trees. Contrary to popular belief, lightening will indeed strike the same place twice....maybe more. I personally know of a giant pine tree that has been struck three times. I don't know what the record but this seems rare to me. To top it all off, the tree is still living; however the poor tree seems to have about the same kind of luck that I do.

Each year, the Walker County Extension office receives numerous calls on lightening struck trees and their fate. We are not alone, as I found out last week.

I recently shared a ride to Cincinnati, Ohio with 3 of my extension colleagues to attend a National County Agricultural Agents Association meeting. As you might imagine, we talked a lot of shop. The topic of lightening struck trees was discussed at length. I was pleased to find out that we all agreed on this topic. Here are our collective thoughts on lightening and trees.

- If a tree is struck, give it two to four weeks to determine if it has been killed outright. This time frame seemed to be the general consensus among all of us as to how long it would take to see if the tree was killed outright.

This, of course, only works during the growing season. If it is struck in the winter, it is much more difficult to predict; however, most thunderstorms occur during the summer growing season.

- There is no need to “paint the wound” or apply tree dressings. Trees have natural compounds that slow decay and encourage regeneration of bark over the wounded area. Often times, tree wound paint not only does no good but will actually slow the bark regeneration process. It has often been said that tree paints are sold mainly to help the tree owner’s feelings rather than for the tree’s benefit.
- Trees struck by lightning that do survive the initial strike are weak and possibly could still die in the next year or two, or even further down the road. Lightning strikes cause a lot of internal damage to trees that may or may not be obvious on first visual inspection.
- Anything that stresses a tree, and lightning strikes certainly qualify as a stress, predispose a tree to other attacks from insects and diseases. Pine beetles, and ambrosia beetles on hardwoods, are two very common insects that attack weakened trees.
- Trees that have been struck by lightning certainly should be monitored very closely for signs of decline for the next several years as they could eventually become a hazard in your landscape. This is especially true if the tree is located near a house or other structure or is located in an area with frequent human activity. Serious consideration should be given to removing such trees before they become dangerous. You may consider using a certified arborist to help you make this determination.
- There are no definites. The giant pine I mentioned earlier that has been struck 3 times has survived over 30 years since its first lightning encounter. Like myself, it’s not pretty, but it’s still alive. One thing is for sure. If a tree is struck and survives, its chances of living are greatly increased by mulching, watering, liming and fertilizing in the root zone. In simpler terms...”keep the tree happy”. This is good advice for any tree in the landscape that you value.

There are additional Extension resources for your information available through our office at 1501 North Airport Road in Jasper or on our website at www.aces.edu. Ask for ANR 814, Street Trees, Site Selection, Planting and Maintenance in the Urban Landscape or ANR 1255, Homeowner’s Guide to Safer Trees.