

Article: An Arborist's Guide to Responding to a Tree Emergency

What Every Homeowner and Property Manager Should Know Before the Storm Arrives

Over the course of nearly fifteen years as an arborist, I've responded to hundreds of tree emergencies throughout the west. Some have been relatively straightforward, a failed limb blocking a driveway after a windstorm, while others have involved mature Douglas-firs resting across homes, apartment communities isolated by fallen trees, commercial properties with blocked fire lanes, and emergency removals requiring cranes, traffic control, and close coordination with fire departments and utility companies. While every emergency presents its own unique challenges, the response is remarkably consistent. The priorities are always the same: protect people, secure the scene, assess the hazards, and then remove the tree using the safest and most appropriate methods available.

One of the biggest misconceptions I encounter is that the emergency begins and ends with the fallen tree. In reality, the tree is often only one part of a much larger problem. A failed tree may have compromised the structural integrity of a home, damaged utility infrastructure, blocked emergency vehicle access, destabilized neighboring trees, or created hazards that are not immediately apparent from the ground. Successfully managing a tree emergency requires looking beyond the obvious damage and understanding the entire situation before any work begins.

Every Tree Emergency Begins with Life Safety

As arborists, our first priority at every emergency is always life safety. Before a chainsaw is ever started, I want to know whether anyone has been injured, whether utilities have been affected, and whether the tree remains stable. Storm-damaged trees frequently contain tremendous amounts of stored mechanical energy. Limbs may be suspended under tension, trunks resting on structures often shift unexpectedly as weight is removed, and partially uprooted trees can continue to fail long after the wind has subsided. Well-intentioned property owners sometimes attempt to remove branches themselves in an effort to reduce damage, but doing so without understanding how the tree is loaded can quickly turn a property emergency into a medical emergency. No amount of property damage is worth risking another injury.

Power lines also deserve special attention. Any tree in contact with electrical conductors should be treated as energized until the utility confirms otherwise. Similarly, gas leaks, damaged utility infrastructure, and compromised structures should immediately shift the response from property preservation to public safety. If someone is injured or trapped, emergency responders should always be called before a tree service. Trees can be replaced. People cannot.

Securing the Scene Before Cleanup Begins

Once immediate life safety concerns have been addressed, the next objective is securing the scene and preventing additional exposure. For a homeowner, this may simply mean keeping family members, neighbors, and curious onlookers away from the damaged area until it can be evaluated safely. For apartment communities, homeowner associations, commercial properties, and municipal facilities, securing the scene is often considerably more involved. Sidewalks may need to be closed, parking lots evacuated, traffic rerouted, or temporary barriers installed to keep residents and the public out of harm's way.

One of the realities of emergency tree work is that many of the greatest hazards are not immediately obvious. A partially failed tree may remain standing for hours or days before finally collapsing, while broken limbs suspended high in the canopy can fall long after the storm has passed. I've responded to incidents where the initial tree failure caused no injuries, only to find that the remaining damaged canopy posed an even greater risk to people walking beneath it. Until the tree has been thoroughly evaluated, it's best to assume the hazard has not yet passed.

Choosing the Right Tree Service Before You Need One

One of the best decisions a property owner or manager can make happens long before the first storm arrives. During a significant regional wind event, qualified tree care companies often receive hundreds of requests for emergency service within a matter of hours. Crews are forced to prioritize incidents involving life safety, blocked roadways, utility hazards, and occupied structures before they can respond to less critical situations. Waiting until a tree has fallen on your home to begin researching contractors places you at a significant disadvantage.

Not every company that removes trees is equipped to perform emergency tree work. Emergency response requires specialized training, experienced personnel, and the ability to make sound decisions under rapidly changing conditions. Removing a tree from an open lawn bears little resemblance to removing a mature Douglas-fir that is resting across a home, entangled in utility lines, or leaning against another compromised tree. Every cut changes how weight is distributed throughout the tree. Understanding where those forces are concentrated and how they will change as material is removed is a skill developed through years of experience. Mistakes made during emergency removals can cause additional structural damage, place workers in danger, or create new hazards for occupants and emergency responders.

When selecting a tree care company, I recommend looking beyond price alone. ISA Certified Arborists, TCIA Accredited companies, properly insured contractors, and firms with dedicated emergency response capabilities have typically invested heavily in training, safety, and specialized equipment. During an emergency, those investments often make the difference between a controlled operation and an unnecessarily dangerous one.

The Right Equipment Can Mean the Difference Between Hours and Weeks

Over the years, I've come to appreciate that successful emergency response is rarely about working harder; it's about bringing the right equipment to the job. Every emergency is different, and the safest solution is often determined by the equipment available rather than the size of the tree itself.

In many situations, a crane is the safest and most efficient way to remove a tree from a structure. Rather than dismantling the tree piece by piece while it continues to load an already damaged building, a crane allows large sections to be lifted vertically, significantly reducing the forces placed on the structure during removal. Bucket trucks provide safe access to broken limbs that cannot be reached from the ground, while skilled climbing arborists use advanced rigging techniques where equipment cannot operate. Grapple trucks, mini loaders, skid steers, and specialized hauling equipment allow crews to clear debris efficiently, restoring access while minimizing additional disturbance to the property.

For homeowners, having access to this equipment often means roof repairs can begin sooner and additional water intrusion can be minimized before the next storm arrives. For commercial properties and multifamily communities, it often means reopening parking lots, restoring access roads, and allowing residents or businesses to return to normal operations far more quickly. Having the right equipment isn't simply about working faster. It's about accomplishing the work safely while reducing additional damage and inconvenience throughout the process.

Emergency Response Looks Different for Property Managers

While homeowners are understandably focused on protecting their families and homes, property managers carry a much broader responsibility. Apartment communities, condominium associations, homeowner associations, commercial campuses, healthcare facilities, and schools must continue functioning even during significant storm events. A fallen tree may affect dozens or even hundreds of residents, employees, customers, or visitors.

When I arrive at a commercial property, I'm immediately evaluating more than the failed tree. Can fire trucks and ambulances still access the property? Has a primary entrance been blocked? Are utilities affecting multiple buildings? Has the failure compromised pedestrian routes or emergency exits? Are there additional trees that have become unstable as a result of the storm? These questions often determine the order in which work is performed.

In many cases, restoring emergency vehicle ingress and egress becomes just as important as removing the tree itself. I've worked incidents where the structural damage was relatively minor, but a single fallen tree prevented emergency responders from reaching an entire residential community. Re-establishing safe access quickly is one of the most valuable services an experienced emergency response team can provide.

Document the Damage Before It Disappears

Once the immediate hazards have been addressed, I always recommend thoroughly documenting the scene before cleanup begins. Photographs should capture the failed tree, damaged structures, vehicles, utilities, surrounding site conditions, and the overall extent of the incident. These images often become invaluable during insurance claims, engineering evaluations, municipal investigations, or future tree risk assessments.

The removal process itself often eliminates much of the physical evidence explaining how the failure occurred. Once the tree has been dismantled and debris removed, it becomes much more difficult to reconstruct the sequence of events or identify contributing factors. Taking the time to document the damage at the outset often proves valuable long after the emergency has been resolved.

Every Emergency Is an Opportunity to Prevent the Next One

Every well seasoned arborist knows that tree emergencies rarely occur in complete isolation. The storm that causes one tree to fail often reveals developing problems elsewhere on the property. Neighboring trees may have experienced root damage, developed structural cracks, or become significantly more exposed to future wind events following the loss of adjacent canopy.

Once the immediate emergency has been resolved, I almost always recommend taking the opportunity to evaluate the remaining trees on the property. In many cases, relatively modest investments in structural pruning, supplemental support systems, tree health care, or the proactive removal of a declining tree can significantly reduce the likelihood of another emergency during the next major storm. The objective isn't to remove every tree that presents some degree of risk. It's to identify the trees most likely to fail and manage them before they become the next emergency call.

Final Thoughts

After nearly fifteen years responding to tree emergencies, one lesson has remained remarkably consistent: successful emergency response has very little to do with how quickly someone can operate a chainsaw. It is the product of preparation, sound judgment, experienced professionals, and the right equipment brought together at exactly the moment they are needed. Whether I'm helping a homeowner with a tree through their roof or coordinating the restoration of access to a multifamily community after a severe windstorm, the priorities never change. Protect people first, stabilize the situation, minimize additional damage, and approach every decision with safety leading the way.

While storms are inevitable, many of the emergencies they create are not. Proactive inspections, routine maintenance, and thoughtful risk management remain the most effective tools we have for reducing storm damage before it occurs. In my experience, the best emergency response will always be the one that never becomes necessary.