

Norfolk pines took on Ike, but winter took a toll

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

The eye-catching, pyramidal symmetry and softly textured, dark-green foliage of Norfolk Island pines growing in local landscapes have endeared it to local gardeners since Norfolk Island pines survived all that Hurricane Ike had to dish out (i.e., saltwater and wind).

This landscape tree acted the role of that pink bunny rabbit because it took a licking from Ike and kept on ticking. It almost appeared that Norfolk Island pines were invigorated by the ordeal.

However, the 2011 winter freeze dealt a major blow to many Norfolk Island pines growing in local landscapes. As is often the case for freeze injury sustained by landscape trees and shrubs, the full extent of damage inflicted usually is not known until the spring growing season is well under way.

Based on the number of samples submitted to my office and telephone calls from concerned homeowners about Norfolk Island pines, many trees suffered devastating cold weather injury.

It was more than two years ago that I reported in one of my weekly columns that Norfolk Island pines were stellar performers in local landscapes after Hurricane Ike's salty flood water. The subtitle to the heading also read that Norfolk Island pines were not a "landscape panacea."

Here's how my April 8, 2009,

column read: "Norfolk Island pine trees have been stellar performers over the past months since Hurricane Ike made landfall. I have been very impressed by the lack of saltwater damage sustained by these trees in areas where other trees (including live oaks) sustained extreme to lethal damage.

Should every homeowner now trek out to buy Norfolk Island pine trees to guard against another devastating loss to landscape trees in the event of another flood with salty water? I would not recommend taking such an unilateral approach.

Even though Norfolk Island pines are remarkably salt-tolerant, they have a weak link: Very low temperatures (30 to 32 degrees Fahrenheit) can cause the growing tips to die and fall. Worse still, temperatures below 25 degrees Fahrenheit can cause severe freeze damage. While Galveston Island usually enjoys mild temperatures during most winters, be reminded that in early December 1989 air temperature dropped to a low of 14 degrees Fahrenheit.

It is tempting to rush into tree planting efforts following a major natural disaster. This might appear to be the most prudent act to help the community feel a sense of recovery. However, in a hurried effort to provide a sense of normalcy, mistakes can be made without a sound plan to follow.

In repopulating hurricane-ravaged landscapes, it would be important to select from a number of different species. Urban foresters suggest that no more than 20 percent of the trees in a community should be from the same tree group (e.g., oaks). This not only helps reduce catastrophic losses from hurricanes but catastrophic losses from severe freezes as well as insect or disease infestations."

Pruning away brown tips Norfolk Island pines will not encourage new growth. Once tips have died and turned brown from any cause, they will not grow further.

Care of newly planted landscape trees

I usually like the concept of setting records, except when it involves rainfall. Unless we get some much-needed rainfall in the next few days, this is shaping up to become one of the driest Aprils on record. The severe lack of rain is affecting newly planted trees as well as some established trees.

Trees are a big investment in our landscapes and replacements are costly. Trees that we take for granted might suffer stress from lack of water. A well-designed and well-installed irrigation system might provide the ideal option. A lower cost alternative is to invest in some soaker hoses to get the water to the root zone and cut down on evaporation.



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If you have several trees grouped together, you can wind soaker hoses around all of them. If you can leave the hose in place, add mulch to keep tree roots cooler, cut down on evaporation and retain soil moisture. Keep the grass away from the trunks of your trees. Grass competes for soil nutrients and moisture.

Newly planted trees and trees planted in the last four years will be at a greater risk than well-established trees. Take care of your trees now so you will be able to enjoy them for years to come.

If your trees get too stressed, you might have some leaf drop. Keep watering and new leaves should be produced. They might come back smaller than before but at least you will have saved your investment.

