A tree, like a human, can be hurt. Not so in the sense of feeling pain but in the sense of injury, damage and wounding. Hurricane Ivan had a significant impact on the trees of Northwest Florida and Southeast Alabama. Many of our beautiful trees were blown over. Many of the trees that are still standing are wounded or damaged. Understanding how a tree responds to a wound is important in understanding how best to care for them after a storm.

A tree, like a human, has ways of healing, or at least dealing with, its wounds. A wound can be defined as an injury that penetrates the bark and exposes the wood beneath. A tree can be wounded by a bird, an animal, an insect or by storm damage. Many of our trees have had limbs broken, twisted or the bark knocked off due to debris carried in the storm surge. This type of storm damage creates wounds which are points of entry for microorganisms that are associated with decay and rot.

The decay of wood is a natural process. Decay is the breakdown of tissue resulting in strength loss. While decay is necessary in the breakdown of dead trees, it is not a process we want in our living tree that we wish to keep.

When a wound occurs, the tree reacts. This reaction, known as the Compartmentalization of Decay in Trees, or CODIT for short, is well documented. CODIT is based on 16 years of research by Dr. Alex Shigo and involved complete dissection of approximately 10,000 trees. To simply state a rather complex process, the tree compartmentalizes or walls off its wound to stop the microorganisms from entering the tree and starting the decay process.

Now that you have knowledge of a tree’s response to wounding, here are a few simple rules for tree care after a storm. These rules improve the tree’s ability to naturally respond to a wound, prevent decay and to repair themselves.

Correctly remove all broken branches that are still attached to the tree. Remove the limbs using a three-cut method to reduce the chance of stripping the bark. First, make a partial cut on large branches from beneath at a point several inches from the trunk. Next, make a full cut on the branch from above at a point several inches out from the first cut. This cut removes the majority of the broken branch to eliminate its weight. Lastly, complete the job with a final cut just outside the branch collar which is the raised area that surrounds the branch where it joins the trunk.

If a limb has already broken off, remove the jagged remains. A nice clean cut will allow the tree to compartmentalize its wound whereas a jagged cut will inhibit the tree’s
Repair torn bark. It's important to eliminate hiding places for insects or places where water can accumulate. If the bark has been torn leaving ragged edges, use a chisel or sharp knife to smooth the side of the tear. Be very careful not to cut too deep. For fastest healing, shape the edge of the wound, as nearly as possible, to an elongated oval. If this shape cannot be obtained, shape the top and bottom of the wounded area so they come to a point, even if the wound must be enlarged slightly. Remove all splintered wood and smooth the surface of the exposed area with a chisel.

Resist the urge to overprune this late in the year. Don't be too concerned if the tree's appearance is not perfect. The loss of branches causes some trees to appear unbalanced or naked. Be patient. You'll be surprised how different the tree will look with new foliage.

Don't top your trees. Topped trees are more likely to die than repair themselves. Topping stimulates the production of lateral sprouts that are not well secured to the topped branch and can easily split from the tree as they grow larger. To avoid this, always prune a branch back to a living branch crotch. This technique is known as drop crotching.

Do not use wound dressings, pruning paints or pruning sealers. Wound dressings do not prevent decay. Dressings can actually trap moisture behind the dressing and encourage rot.

Hurricane Ivan reduced the tree canopy in many areas. While many trees had to removed, many damaged trees remain. Proper pruning and care of our damaged trees will help them repair themselves.