

Storm Wind Loads On Trees

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Trees must withstand wind to survive. Wind and gravity both impact trees in storms, but the dominant load is from wind. Storm winds push on tree crowns and stems causing root plates to rock. The result of storm winds are forces twisting and bending tree parts causing either the part to fail or the supporting soil to fail. Trees sense structural stress and attempts to minimize failures through reactive growth. Trees modify their structure over time as they are challenged by wind. Trees are biologically designed to sustain average wind loads. What are the loads applied by storms to trees?

Sailing Along

A tree has a large sail area (leaves and twigs) held upright high into the air by a tapered mast (stem). The stem is woven onto a thick horizontal mat of large structural roots at the stem base which forms a root plate. Rapidly tapering roots grow away from the stem base to provide the tree with an absorbing surface. The center of gravity (effective weight center) of a tree is usually somewhere in the middle of the stem above the root plate. Gravity is pulling down on the tree all over but has a total effect focused at the center of gravity. Wind is pushing the tree around its center of gravity.

The weight of the tree is pulled down onto the soil surface. As long as its center of gravity remains positioned above its supporting base, the stem is stiff enough to keep the tree upright. If the center of gravity for a tree is not positioned over its supporting base, gravity may topple the tree if the tensile and compressive strength of the stem and root base is inadequate. Storm winds can push the center of gravity in the stem out from over its supporting base. The combined result is wind moving the tree laterally and gravity pulling the tree downward, providing a rotation force rolling the tree out of the ground -- a load wheel. Figure 1.

Gravity

Trees seldom fail under their own weight -- external loads stress and strain the tree until failure. Gravity loads trees in tandem with wind to initiate these failures, but wind loads greatly exceed gravity loads in most situations. Wind is an acute mechanical variable for which trees must constantly adjust growth processes. Gravity is a chronic stress and strain with which trees must cope. Adding mass to a tree in the form of growth (size, extent, and reach), or in applied water, ice or snow loads, can magnify gravity's impact on the tree, causing fiber creep (permanent tissue changes) and failures. But, it is storm winds which push tree structures to their limits.

Impact Trinity

In order to more clearly understand storm initiated failures in trees, wind loads must be fully appreciated. Wind has three primary components which impact trees: 1) velocity or speed (mile per hour or feet per second); 2) acceleration (velocity changes over time or velocity squared); and, 3) throw weight (mass of air

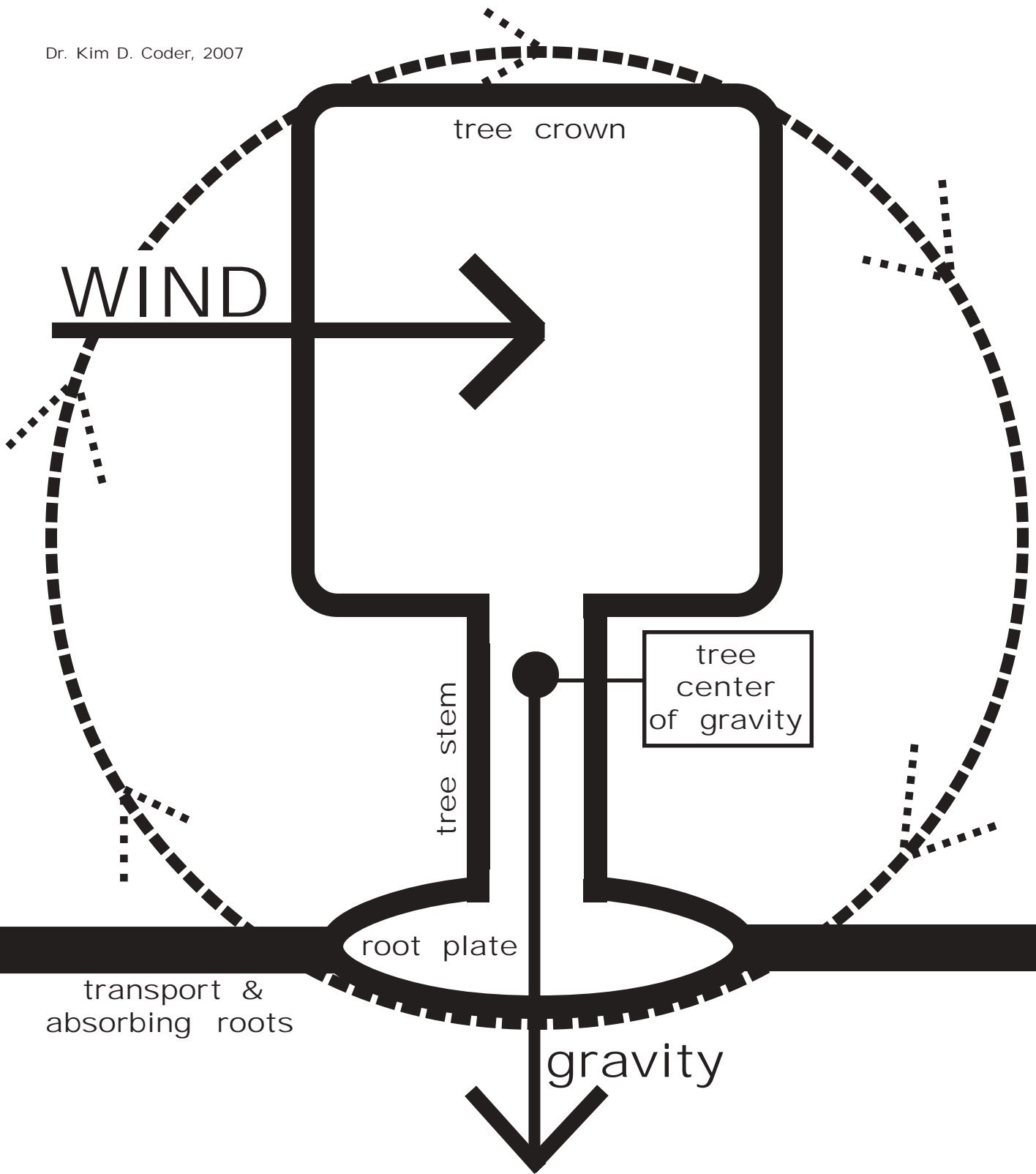


Figure 1: Storm wind forces, and to a lesser degree gravity, act to rotate a tree out of the soil as a combined load wheel.

and its contents). Wind speed is a simple concept easily measured and applied against a tree. It is not solely wind speed which usually pushes trees to catastrophic failures.

Wind acceleration is a dynamic load variable which is not easily measured. How fast wind speeds change through acceleration and deceleration place constantly changing loads on trees. The duration of time between minimum and peak velocity (gusts), and then peak velocity and minimum velocity (calms) greatly impact trees. Is the changing wind load applied over one second or one hour? A load gently applied over time can be more easily dealt with in a tree than a hammer blow of wind applied suddenly. Rapid changes in wind velocity impacts trees as velocity squared.

Wind at increasingly greater velocity does not exist in a perfect linear, laminar, and continuous flow. Storm winds are not equivalent to wind tunnel winds. Not only are storm winds gusting in large wave forms, wind can show many smaller periodic patterns which constantly and quickly load and unload trees. Wind is a complex of pulsing and rotating pressure waves with multiple periods. Sometimes these wave peaks or pulses of wind combine to generate extraordinary gusts, other times the calms between the different wave patterns combine to generate relatively still periods.

The third component of wind impacting trees is the mass of the wind stream, sometimes called the throw weight of the wind. Wind propelling rain, ice, snow, soil, or debris is heavier (has more mass) than atmospheric gas components. For the same wind velocity, the more materials in the windstream, the more impact this wind will have on a tree. There is a weight class difference in storm winds which all impact trees differently. In addition to twisting and bending loads applied by “heavier” winds, tissue scouring can greatly damage trees.

Wind Hammer

Wind loads on trees can be summarized as a constant pressure, additional pulsing of short wind bursts, a rolling shock wave of high pressure occasionally applied, an overall acceleration and deceleration around an average value, and a variable weight windstream. Trees in storms are hammered with a dynamic combination of blows. Note the average wind velocity values and gust peaks measured for media meteorology information do not adequately represent the full dynamic nature of storm winds on trees.

For example, it is both gusts and calms which impact trees. Trees bend and twist back against the force of the wind and rebound in calm periods between gusts. Winds load and unload trees in different ways, over various time frames, and on different tree parts. Dynamic storm winds are more difficult to successfully resist over time than a simple straight wind. The periodicity of tree swaying, coupled with the frequency of wind pressure peaks, can generate tremendous synergies of load and resistance in trees.

Storming

As small scale winds differ over time, large scale meteorologic events differ in the amount and intensity of energy applied to trees and landscapes. The six major forms of storms considered when examining tree impacts are thunderstorms, hurricanes, glazing (ice) events, tornadoes, derechos (horizontal rolling squall lines with clusters of downbursts), and snow events. Lightning is an additional tree damaging feature of storms. Every storm event has a different size, power, longevity, duration, and residual impact. Different areas of a landscape receives different combinations of storm wind energy not predictable based solely upon topography, aspect, openness, or history.

T-Storms

Thunderstorms can be found across the continent. Thunderstorms generate updrafts in the atmosphere and produce ground level winds below. Figure 2 is a map of the average number of thunderstorm days in the continental United States. Hot, humid air running into colder air masses tend to generate storms with massive air flows. Note the Southeastern and Central United States have many events per year which could potentially overload and damage trees. Florida leads the nation with thunderstorm days.

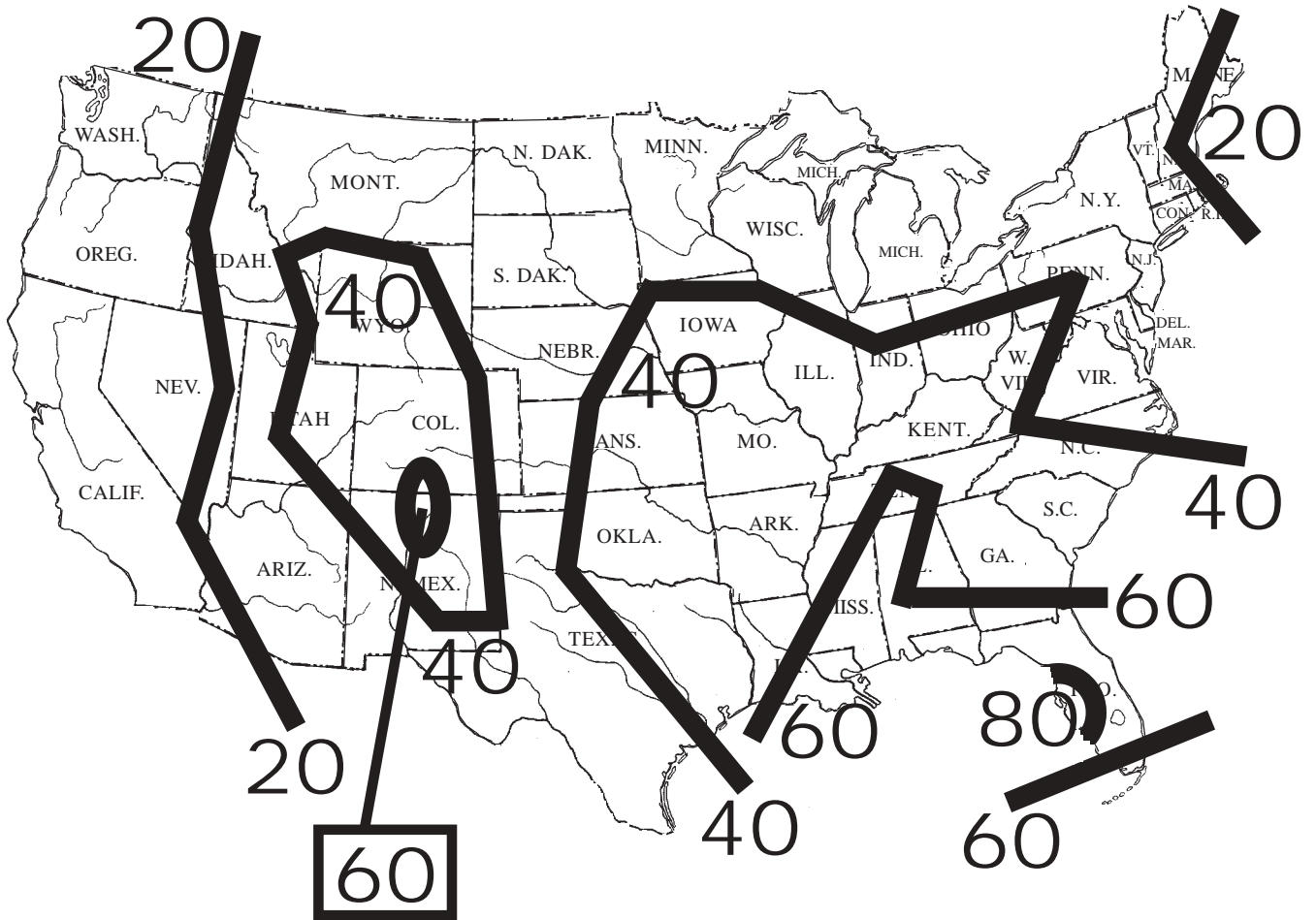


Figure 2: Average number of days with thunderstorm events per year.

Wind in thunderstorms are usually reported in average miles per hour and peak gust speeds. Historically winds from thunderstorms were classified by a 0-12 numerical force scale. These classes comprised the Beaufort Wind Scale developed for mariners. Beaufort Wind Scale force numbers are tied to a miles per hour wind velocity range and a simple descriptive title. Table 1 provides the Beaufort Wind Scale force number, wind speed range in miles per hour, a mid-point wind pressure value in pounds per square feet, wind force classification description, and potential tree impacts.

Table 1: Beaufort Wind Scale force numbers, wind speed range in miles per hour, mid-point wind pressure value in pounds per square feet, wind force classification description, and potential tree impacts.

force number	wind speed	mid-point wind pressure*	wind force description	tree impacts
0	< 1 mph	< 0.003	calm	
1	1-3	0.01 lbs/ft ²	light air	
2	4-7	0.08	light breeze	leaves rustle
3	8-12	0.26	gentle breeze	small twigs move
4	13-18	0.63	moderate breeze	large twigs move
5	19-24	1.2	fresh breeze	small trees sway
6	25-31	2.1	strong breeze	large branches move
7	32-38	3.2	moderate gale	large trees sway
8	39-46	4.8	fresh gale	twigs break
9	47-54	6.7	strong gale	small & medium branch break
10	55-63	9.2	whole gale	trees break or uproot
11	64-72	12	violent storm	forests destroyed
12	> 73	> 14	hurricane	massive tree loss

(* column is not part of the wind scale given here but added by the author)

For example from Table 1, a “force 8” wind is called a “fresh gale” and has a velocity between 39 and 46 mile per hour, breaking twigs on some trees. A force 12 wind is 73 miles per hour or greater, which begins the hurricane classifications.

Hurricanes

Figure 3 is a map of historic hurricane landfalls in the Eastern United States over the last 50 years. Any land form which juts out into the Atlantic Ocean is prone to being slammed by a hurricane being driven north and east by prevailing winds. Most of the coast bordering the Gulf of Mexico has seen many hurricane landfalls. Florida which borders both the Atlantic and Gulf is ideally positioned to take hits from many hurricanes. The cumulative impacts of hurricane events on trees is to limit height, and modify crown and stem shape, generating a “maritime” tree canopy form.

As wind velocity climbs past 73 miles per hour, a new wind classification system is commonly used. The hurricane “category” value is spouted by the public and in the simplest weather forecasts. This classification system is the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale. Table 2 provides a summary of the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale with category number, wind speed in miles per hour, mid-point velocity range wind pressure value in pounds per square feet, expected storm sea surge in feet, and potential tree impacts. This hurricane scale has a noticeably uneven level of increasing wind velocity classes topping out at greater than 155 miles per hour in a category 5 hurricane.

Table 2: Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale providing hurricane category number, wind speed in miles per hour, mid-point velocity range wind pressure value in pounds per square feet, expected storm surge in feet, and potential tree impacts.

storm category	wind speed	mid-point wind pressure*	storm surge	tree impacts
1	74-95 mph	19 lbs/ft ²	4-5 feet	branch & tree failures
2	96-110	28	6-8	major tree failures
3	111-130	38	9-12	large tree failures – leaves stripped
4	131-155	54	13-18	massive tree blow-downs
5	> 155	> 63	> 18	almost all trees down

(* column is not part of the wind scale given here but added by the author)

For example from Table 2, a category 3 hurricane would have top sustained winds of 111-130 miles per hour and push ashore a storm surge of water 9 to 12 feet in height. A category 3 hurricane would be expected to strip the leaves from trees and topple trees with large sail areas. Trees with full frontal exposure to category 3 winds would be expected to fail.

Surging

Trees are impacted by a storm surge in several ways. A storm surge is usually composed of near ocean level salinity water pushed ashore. Knowing the height of the surge and topography of the area can help predict present and future tree problems from soil salt. Storm surges also can lead to plastic and liquid soil limits being reached in finer soils, and finer soil layers within coarse soils. Water logging of soils can greatly reduce soils

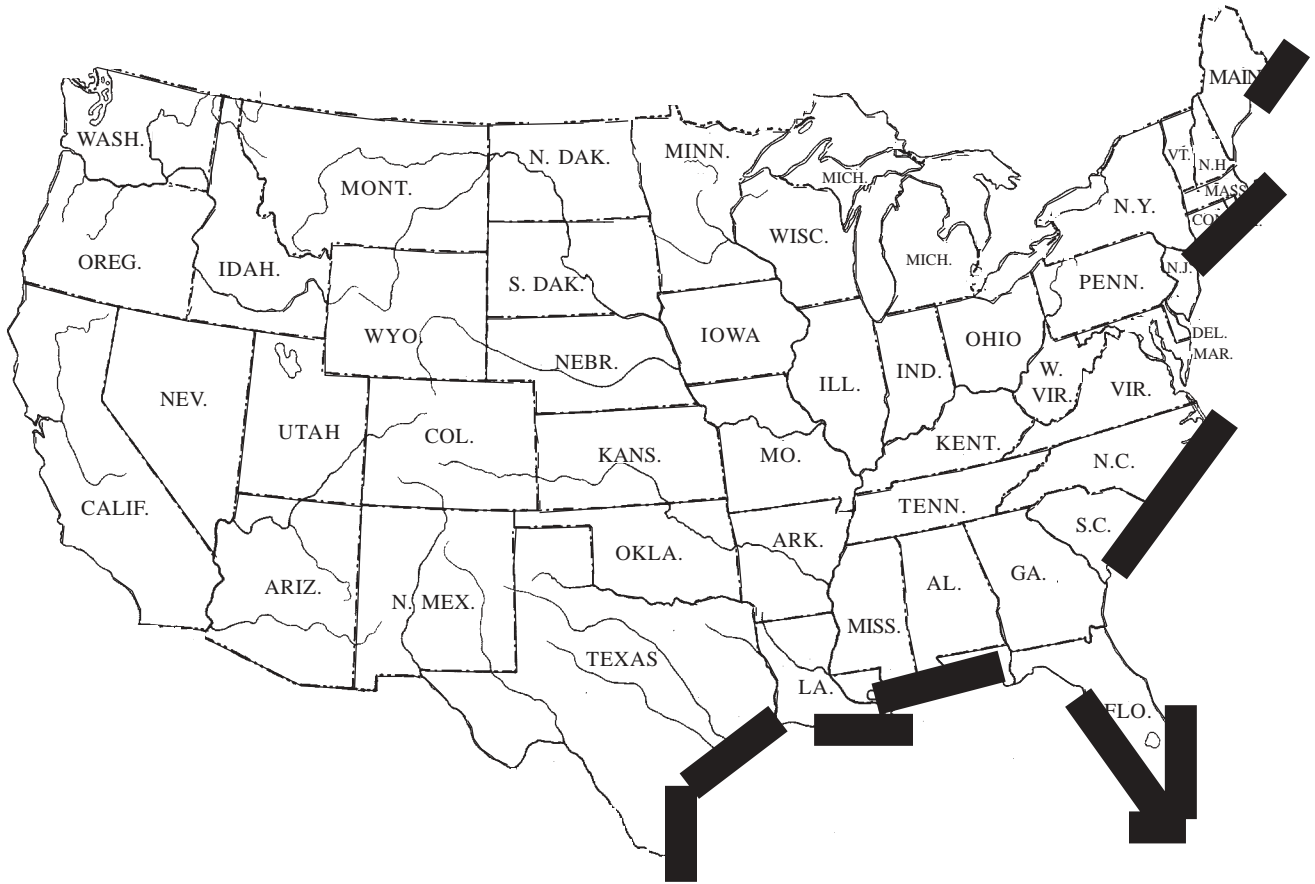


Figure 3: Historic hurricane landfalls over a 50 year period in the Eastern United States.

strength and root resistance to slipping under wind loads. On the other hand, as trees are flooded, and flood waters rise, the weight of the water over the root plate can off-set (by stabilizing the tree) some of the soil strength loss.

Inland from beach areas are places lower in the landscape than their surroundings or places protected by levees and berms. As storm surges rise, the chance of inundation increases and the difficulty in removing accumulated brackish water can increase. In low-lying areas protected by levees, levee height would have to be taller than any storm surge, plus additional height to prevent overtopping and erosion of the levee.

Tornadoes

Tornadoes can be a component of many types of storms. This intense, high velocity, rotating storm event plagues trees. The top momentary wind speeds can be tremendous. Direction of the heaviest winds change with the passage of the storm. Trees near the direct track of the tornado must withstand the bending loads applied by winds as well as the twisting (torque). In addition, tornadoes are often accompanied by heavy rains, damaging hail, and intense lightning activity, all of which impact trees.

Figure 4 is a map developed from storm data from the last 45 years. Figure 4 shows the average number of tornadoes per year for the continental United States. The map categories are broad but demonstrate a concentration of storms in the legendary “tornado alley” of the Great Plains.

Tornadoes in the United States are categorized using the Fujita Tornado Scale. Table 3 provides the category “F” number, wind velocity range, mid-point velocity range wind pressure value, generic tornado description, and potential tree impacts. The Fujita Tornado Scale categories always begin with the letter “F” to assure there is no confusion with hurricane category numbers. For example from Table 3, a F3 tornado would have wind speeds of 158-206 miles per hour, wind pressure at 182 miles per hour of 87 pounds per square feet, and is called a severe tornado. Trees and forests near the storm-track will be flattened and twisted apart. Because of the narrow band of the most intense winds, many trees survive near-misses by tornadoes.

Table 3: Fujita Tornado Scale providing the category or “F” number of a tornado, wind velocity range, mid-point velocity range wind pressure value, tornado description term, and potential tree impacts.

category	wind speed range (mph)	mid-point wind pressure (lbs/ft ²)*	tornado descriptor	tree impacts
F0	40-73	8.3	gale tornado	minimal damage – branch breakage
F1	73-112	23	moderate	moderate damage – trees uprooted
F2	113-157	48	significant	major damage – large trees snapped & uprooted
F3	158-206	87	severe	severe damage – forests flattened
F4	207-260	144	devastating	devastating damage – all trees destroyed
F5	261-318	221	incredible	incredible damage – tree parts debarked
F6	319-379	321	inconceivable	inconceivable damage – everything flattened

(* column is not part of the wind scale given here but added by the author)

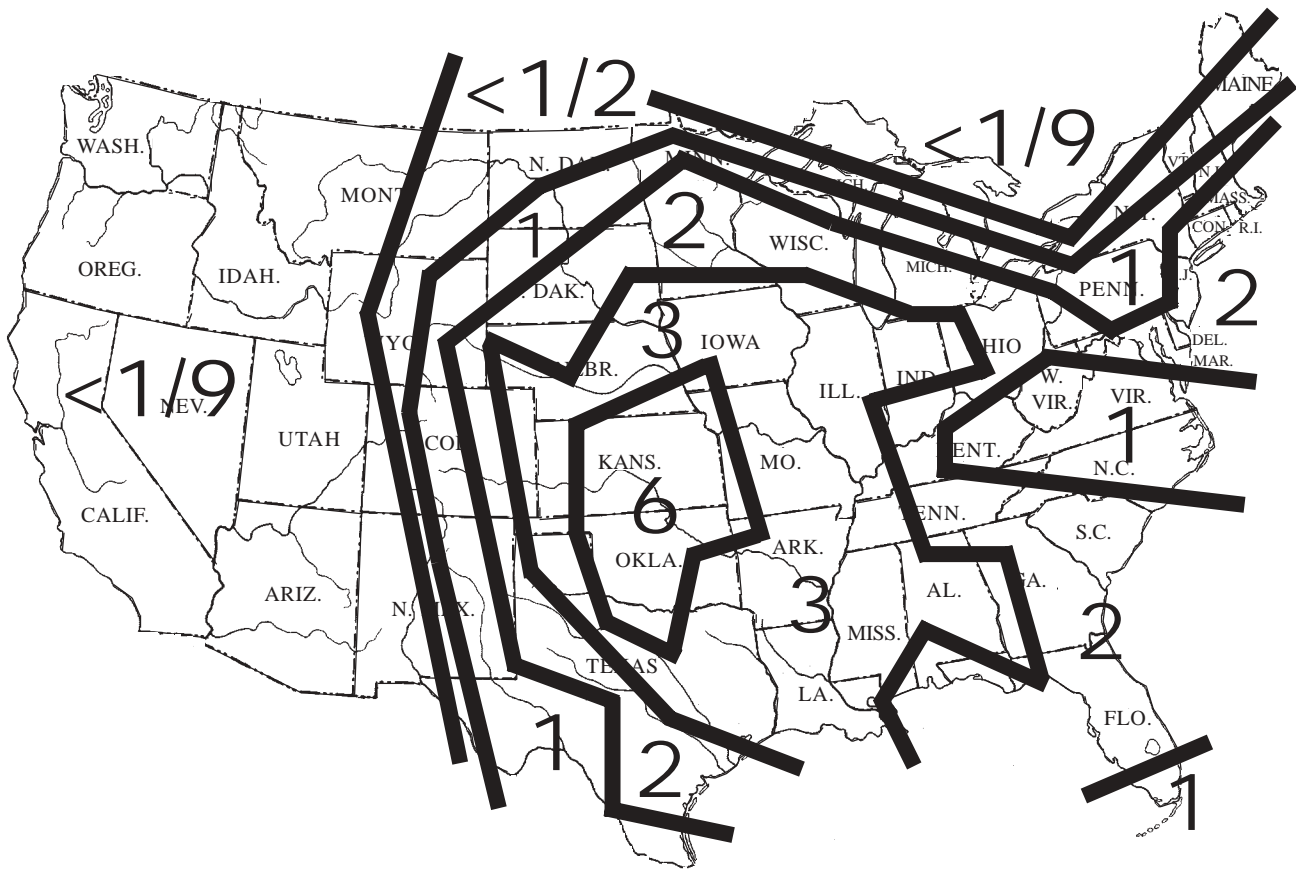


Figure 4: Average number of tornadoes per year averaged over 45 years of data.

Note the Fujita Tornado Scale ranges from a F0 gale tornado with winds ranging from 40-72 miles per hour to a F6 inconceivable tornado with winds ranging from 319-379 miles per hour. A F6 tornado has not been identified in North America. F2 to F5 tornadoes snap stems, strip branches, and uproot trees close to the storm track. Overall tornado storm damage to trees often seems less in tornadoes than in other less violent but more widespread storms because the devastation is along a narrow band which can be reached from either side by clean-up and removal equipment. The wind pressures generated in tornadoes are clearly the most extreme of any storm type.

Tornado II

The Fujita Tornado Scale was designed for special uses in the energetic storms of North America. It does not easily coincide with other wind scales. Another tornado scale is used elsewhere in the world which categorizes tornadoes with less intensity and wind velocity. This tornado wind scale is the Meaden Tornado T-Scale. This scale was designed to fit well with and compliment the Beaufort Wind Scale. Table 4 provides the category “T” number, wind velocity range in miles per hour, mid-point velocity range wind pressure value in pounds per square feet, generic tornado description, and potential tree impacts.

Table 4: Meaden Tornado T-Scale showing the category “T” number, wind velocity range in miles per hour, mid-point velocity range wind pressure value in pounds per square feet, generic tornado description, and potential tree impacts.

category	wind speed range (mph)	mid-point wind pressure (lbs/ft ²)*	tornado descriptor	tree impacts
T0	39-54	7.7	light	twig breakage
T1	55-72	11	mild	slight damage
T2	73-92	18	moderate	branch twist and breakage, small trees uprooted
T3	93-114	28	strong	some large trees broken
T4	115-136	42	severe	numerous trees uprooted or broken
T5	137-160	58	intense	most trees uprooted or broken
T6	161-186	79	moderately devastating	trees destroyed
T7	187-212	105	strongly devastating	trees partially debarked
T8	213-240	135	severely devastating	trees flattened
T9	241-269	171	intensely devastating	trees completely debarked
T10	270-299	213	super tornado	all trees blown apart and toppled

(* column is not part of the wind scale given here but added by the author)

Storm Intensity Zones

In trying to summarize storm winds and associated damage to trees, the Coder Storm Intensity Zone Map was developed for the continental United States. This map was created using averages of historic data for thunderstorms, hurricanes, tornadoes, lightning ground strike frequency, ice glazing events, snow fall accumulation values, and general wind speed values. The result is shown in Figure 5, a map of storm intensity as it relates to potential tree damage. The range of storm intensity zones are from 0 to 10. Zone 10 has the greatest potential per year for storm damage to trees. Note these zones include both wind and gravity related tree structural impacts. The most intense area of potential tree damage from storms is in the zone 10 southern tip of Florida.

The value of this map (Figure 5) is in appreciating the areas which share common storm intensity and associated risk of tree damage. For example, most of Georgia is in the same zone as most of Kansas, the heart of tornado alley. The storm types may be different but the total yearly impact on trees from storms is approximately the same.

Gusting

In all of the meteorological scales presented here, wind speed in miles per hour is a common means of demonstrating storm strength and potential for tree damage. Unfortunately, for most people listening to media reports of storm conditions, the wind speeds and associated tree impacts can be underestimated. The traditional way of presenting wind speeds to a general audience has been a head-high above the ground measurement in miles per hour taken at an airport or in an open field and then averaged over time (usually every 10 minutes to one hour). This average wind speed is helpful in appreciating the intensity of any storm.

Remember it is the gusts and calms which are critical to understanding wind loads and associated risks of tree damage. An average wind speed of X could have gusts of 1.5X to 2X hidden within the wind speed value. For example, an average wind speed may hover around 50 miles per hour for a period of time in the middle of a storm. It is entirely possible for maximum wind speeds to have reached 75 to 100 miles per hour in short duration gusts.

Force Not Speed

Storm wind loads on trees are not well represented by wind velocity values. Wind impacts on trees are directly related to the force or pressure the wind applies to tree parts. The pressure of the wind applied to a tree can be estimated by multiplying the square of wind speed times one-half the density of the air moved. The pressure of wind on trees is usually calculated at some standard temperature (like 68°F) at sea level. I have prepared a simplified formula for quick estimates of wind pressure:

$$\text{wind pressure in pounds per square foot} = (0.013) \times (\text{wind speed in mph} \times (0.45))^2.$$

Table 5 presents the comparison between wind velocity in miles per hour and wind pressure in pounds per square foot created using the simplified formula above. I added wind pressure values to the other storm wind classification scales (seen in Tables 1, 2, 3, & 4) to help tree professionals appreciate the magnitude of force applied to trees. Note that as wind speed doubles, the wind pressure against a tree per square foot of frontal area would not simply double, but quadruple.

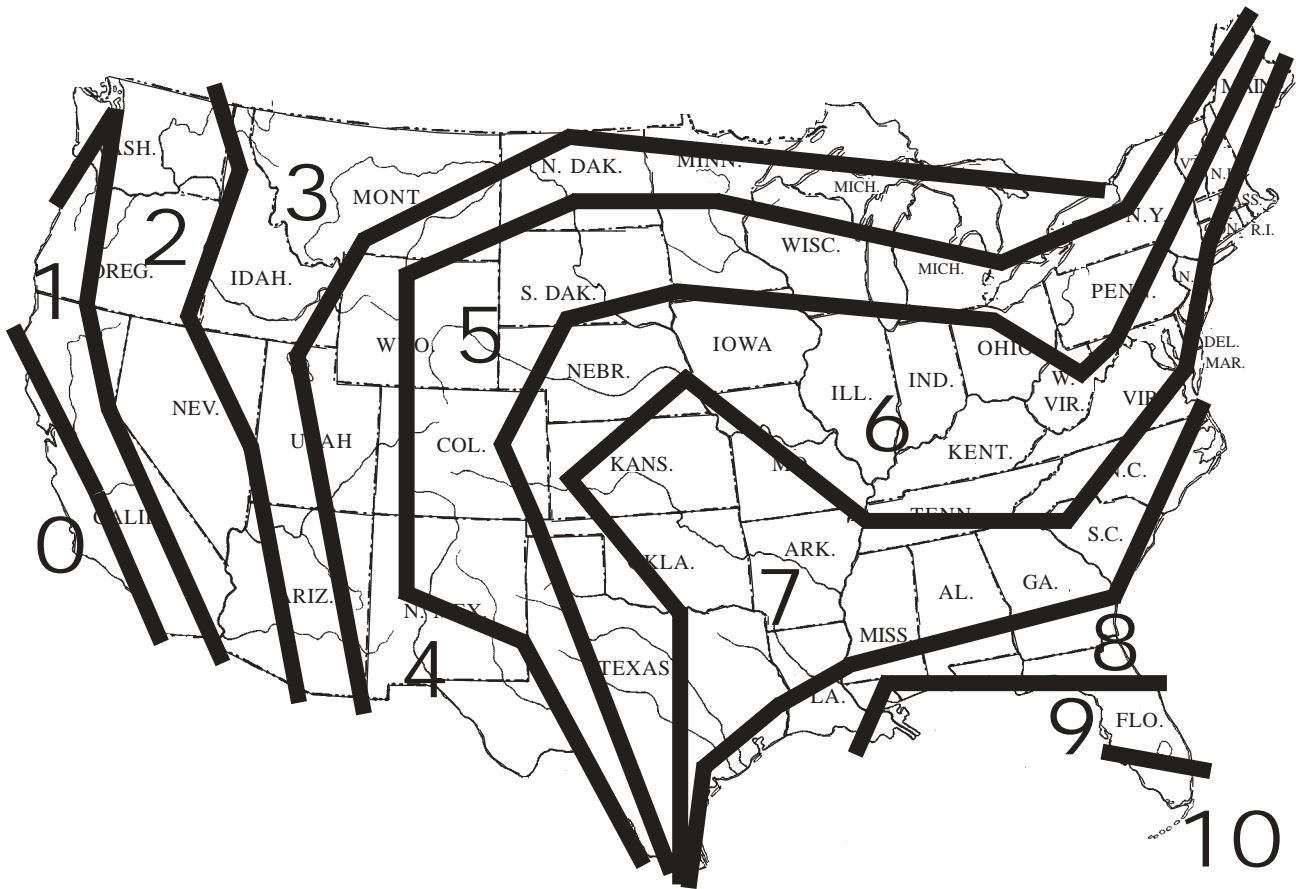


Figure 5: Coder Storm Intensity Zone Map of potential risks for tree damage. Zone 10 represents the greatest storm intensity area, leading to the greatest risk of tree damage.

Table 5: Estimated wind pressures in pounds per square feet (lbs/ft²) calculated under standard conditions for various wind velocities in miles per hour (mph).

wind velocity (mph)	pounds per square feet (lbs/ft ²)	wind velocity (mph)	pounds per square feet (lbs/ft ²)
5	0.1	80	17
10	0.3	85	19
15	0.6	90	21
20	1.1	95	24
25	1.7	100	26
30	2.4	110	32
35	3.2	120	38
40	4.2	130	45
45	5.3	140	52
50	6.6	150	59
55	8.0	175	81
60	9.5	200	105
65	11	225	133
70	13	250	165
75	15	275	199

$$\text{wind pressure in pounds per square foot} = (0.013) \times (\text{wind speed in mph} \times (0.45))^2$$

For example from Table 5, if wind velocity is 20 miles per hour, the wind pressure applied to the frontal aspect area of a tree is 1.1 pounds per square feet. If storm wind velocity then accelerates and levels off at 40 miles per hour, the wind pressure is 4.2 pounds per square feet. Table 5 shows a small increase in wind velocity can have great impacts on wind pressure applied to a tree. Figure 6 provides a graphical view of the greatly increasing wind force generated with increasing wind velocity.

Tree Damage

From all the proceeding storm wind load values produced and reviewed here, several conclusions can be made. These conclusions are summarized in Table 6, the Coder Scale of Tree Wind Damage. The Coder Scale of Tree Wind Damage is intended to help tree health care professions focus on tree damage potential not storm severity. Table 6 presents wind velocity in mile per hour, wind pressure as applied to trees in pounds per square foot, and potential tree damage. Remember Table 6 is only a guide and tree loss can occur at any wind speed, or under calm conditions, for many reasons other than wind loading. Wind pressure on trees coated with ice can double or triple the stress and strain developed.

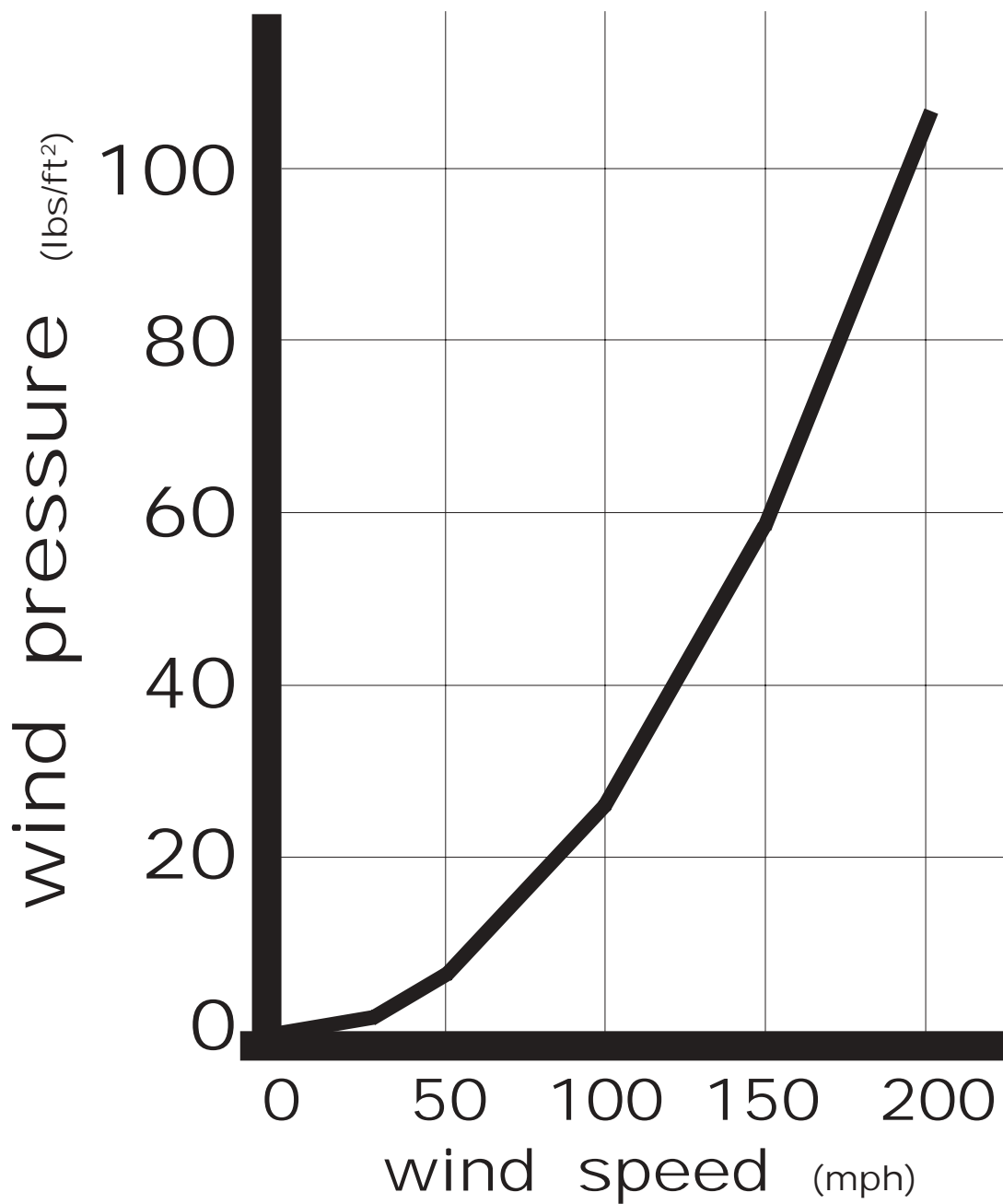


Figure 6: Pressure of storm winds at different wind speeds applied to trees.

$$\text{wind pressure in pounds per square feet} = (0.013) \times (\text{wind speed in miles per hour} \times (0.45))^2$$

Table 6: Coder Scale of Tree Wind Damage showing wind velocity in miles per hour, wind pressure in pounds per square foot, and potential tree damage.

wind speed (mph)	wind pressure (lbs/ft ²)	tree damage descriptor
20	1.1	root / soil interface fractures initiated
40	4.2	major stem & crown sway – branch failures
	** T1 = end of crown drag reconfigurations = ~55mph (8 lbs/ft²) **	
60	9.5	stem breakage – uprooting
90	21	major tree failures
	** T2 = tree safety factors consumed = ~95mph (24 lbs/ft²) **	
125	41	catastrophic tree losses
>160	67	massive tree destruction

Because wind speed does not represent the actual wind force applied to a tree, always use wind pressure values. Wind pressure values here are in pounds per square feet of the tree’s front aspect to windward. Wind pressure values help remind professionals about the tremendous increase in forces applied to trees as wind speeds climb. Always use wind speed in miles per hour when addressing a lay audience since this is a common and relatable value. Wind pressure values should be prepared and used for profession tree health care managers and tree risk assessments as these values show the true extent of loading and resistance in trees.

Structural Thresholds

In addition to wind speed and pressure values, Table 6 also presents two critical mechanical thresholds in trees, T1 and T2. The first limiting threshold (T1) is when wind speeds approach and exceed 55 miles per hour (8 pounds of wind pressure per square feet). T1 is where the drag reconfiguration in a tree has been reached and cannot significantly be reduced any further without tissue loss (i.e. front impact of the wind on a tree has been minimized). Up to this threshold level, the leaves were blown back against the wind, then rolled creating less drag or resistance. With increasing wind velocity, the peripheral twigs and branches were reconfigured in the crown as they fell back and bent against the wind. Finally, all the crown reconfiguration through reduction of wind resistance occurs and any more reduction in wind resistance will mean breaking of twigs and branches.

Table 7 is the Coder Index of Tree Crown Reconfiguration used to quantify stages in how tree crowns fall back against the wind. With increasing wind pressure, more crown tissues are pushed back by the wind, until complete elastic flexure (tissue will return to original position when calm) is reached. After this point, inelastic flexure (permanent tissue creep from mechanical overload) and tissue breakage processes are initiated. For example from Table 7, an index value of CIII is derived from two pounds of wind pressure per square feet being applied to various components across the tree crown. The tree crown is reconfigured by the wind resulting in a period of drag increases in a near linear form until T1 is exceeded.

Table 7: Coder Index of Tree Crown Reconfiguration giving index value symbol, wind speed in miles per hour, wind pressure in pounds per square feet, a tree crown reconfiguration description, and a tree crown reconfiguration percentage.

index value	wind speed (mph)	wind pressure (lbs/ft ²)	tree crown reconfiguration descriptor	tree crown reconfiguration
C0	0	0	gravity impacts only	0 %
CI	10	0.3	petiole & blade deforming, & twig swaying	5 %
CII	19	1.0	leaves rolled back & large peripheral twigs sway	10 %
CIII	28	2.0	twigs pulled back and peripheral branches sway	25 %
CIV	37	3.6	branches pulled back and stem swaying	45 %
CV	46	5.6	twig breakage, stem pushed / held downwind	70 %
CVI	55	8.0	twig & branch breakage (T1 threshold from Table 6)	100 %

The second constraining threshold (T2 in Table 6) is reached in a tree around 95 miles per hour (24 pounds of wind pressure per square feet) when the mechanical safety factors of tree structure have been reached for most trees in common situations. At this threshold, major damage is being initiated and resistance success by the tree against increasing wind pressure is only through shear luck of position, buffering of wind loading by surroundings, or having been challenged by these wind forces over many seasons.

Conclusions

Trees are amazing in their successful growth and longevity under conditions of severe mechanical loading from storms. We will continue to be surprised and inspired by trees surviving storms which stripped human structures from the soil surface. Storm wind loads on trees must be accounted for in assessing tree structure and appreciating risks. It is the wind load, not the tree resistance, which must play a greater role in our observations of trees standing against the wind.