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Trees that can destroy and trees that can save your life in a cyclone

By Ben Collins

Trees can protect your home as well as destroy it, depending on which trees you have.



We all know that trees can be damaged and destroyed by cyclones.

And when they come down they can destroy houses, fences and cars as well as block roads and emergency service access.

But Greening Australia's Senior Environmental Scientist, Dr Greg Calvert, has found some unexpected results from over 20 years of research into the impacts of cyclones on trees.

Some trees are more likely to be damaged in a cyclone than others.

Dr Calvert says '...there's an enormous amount of variation...There are a handful of trees that will stand up to a strong, category five cyclone.'

He says the type of trees growing in a garden could be '...the difference between the survival of you house and the destruction.'

As a general rule, fast growing, short-lived plants are more likely to come down in a cyclone than slow growing plants.

The slow growers have more dense and strong timber.

The strongest of all trees are those that naturally grow in wind and flood prone environments such as river banks and beaches.

In Dr Calvert's hometown of Townsville, the category two winds produced by cyclone Yasi knocked over an estimated 63,000 trees which caused approximately 100 million dollars of damage.

And just five species caused half of that.

The worst tree of all, according to the data, was the African mahogany.

They are big, fast growing shade trees, commonly used across northern Australia in gardens and along roads.

In Townsville, entire avenues of African mahoganies came down, hopelessly blocking major roads with tonnes of big timber.

Dr Calvert's advice is that you don't want these trees anywhere near houses or major roads.

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These golden-cane palms protected this house from a roof ripped off a building by severe tropical cyclone Yasi. (8/2/11) (Greg Calvert)

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Peltophorum, or yellow flame tree, was the next worst tree.

Map Broome 6725



They're big trees and over 500 were uprooted in Townsville during Yasi.

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Pink trumpet trees, or *Tabebuia* are not good in cyclones with 80% going down in Townsville.

Most gums and acacias are best avoided when it comes to cyclones.



They are fast growing and large; heavy limbs are prone to snapping off

The older they get the more prone they are to cyclone damage.

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But just when you're thinking of bulldozing your entire block, planting the right trees can actually save your house in a big blow.

Dr Calvert has seen examples where entire roofs have been blown off a house, only to be wrapped around a seriously tough tree that has protected everything else downwind.

Palms like golden cane, cabbage palms, and date palms can stand up to category five winds.

Coconuts will snap or tip over in strong cyclonic winds, especially if they haven't been de-nutted.

The best trees include some paperbarks that naturally grow beside rivers like *Melaleuca leucodendra*.

Native cypress pines, pandanus, beefwood and Leichhardt trees are also super tough.

Mango trees are common big trees in backyards across northern Australia.

Dr Calvert hasn't seen many mango trees come down, but in over category three winds they shed big branches that can cause serious damage.

'You probably don't want big branches reaching out over your house.'

You can also make trees more resistant by the way you prune and water them.

Reducing the height and wind resistance of a tree will help.

But you need to also be aware of 'planes of weakness' wear branches are attached to trunks.

When you water a tree, water it more, less often.

Occasional, deep watering will encourage deep rooting and a strong tree.

There's a lot to consider when it comes to preparing your garden to be cyclone safe, but it's an aspect of gardening that could save your life.

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