

IN YOUR GARDEN

# Plants rebounding after Charley

When the power went out late in the afternoon of Friday the 13th last month, the windows of my Florida room became one huge flat-screen TV. But there was only one channel to watch. A Category 4 thug named Charley had hit the Southwest Florida coast, and it was wreaking havoc with my garden.

At my home in south Lee County — about 3 miles from the gulf near the crossroads of Fort Myers Beach and Sanibel-Captiva — sustained winds of 90 mph from the south were relentlessly whipping my landscape.

On the day after the hurricane hit, I inspected the damage. A bougainvillea that overwhelmed a lattice-work fence on the south side of my property had been laden with gorgeous magenta blooms. Charley stripped it of both leaves and flowers.

Three coconut palms bent northward at 45-degree angles, and a 15-foot-tall sea grape now occupied more of my neighbor's yard than my own. My plumbagos, with their cobalt-blue blossoms had sprawled beautifully among burgundy ti plants. They were now flowerless.

Three tall banana plants among a clump of a dozen



Photo by RON SYMPSON  
Simpson's invasive schefflera (seen before Hurricane Charley) is now history, and good riddance, he says. Other landscaping is doing well.

had folded to the ground, my red-tip cocoplums were shredded, my centerpiece pond apple was almost leafless, and a tall schefflera had snapped in half and was lying in the street.

But today, a month later, my garden is on the rebound from Charley. And the same thing will happen on the east coast as Frances becomes a bitter memory.

In my post-hurricane yard, some of the damage is

irreparable. The messy sea grape and invasive schefflera are history, and I bid them both good riddance. But at my home and around the neighborhood, the signs of a revitalized landscape are heartening.

New leaf buds have emerged on my bougainvilleas, cocoplums and pond apple. My hibiscus are boasting huge showy flowers, the coconut palms have new growth buds, and the plum-

bagos have boldly reblossomed. Even the bananas, which I had cut to the ground, have been reborn — 3-foot-tall shoots have popped up from the stumps.

Around the neighborhood, hearty oaks, massive gumbo limbos and fractured silver trumpets are boasting new leaf buds. Frond-stripped royal palms are recovering and flowering shrubs are flowering once again.

I liken the rebirth to the inevitable rebound from a winter cold snap, during which many trees turn instantly deciduous, littering the ground with their leaves. But as the weather warms, recovery is quick, and in short order, bare branches are transformed into lush green canopies.

And here's my positive spin on a bad situation: The effects of Florida's tandem hurricanes now provide us with the opportunity to reassess and redesign. The pleasure of gardening in Florida is back.

So there is life after Charley — and soon, there will be life after Frances, as well.

Landscape consultant Ron Simpson publishes "Ron Simpson's Florida Garden" magazine and is the author of "250 Most-Asked Florida Gardening Questions" and other books on Florida gardening. To send a question, e-mail [ronsimpson@earthlink.net](mailto:ronsimpson@earthlink.net); visit the Web site [TheFloridaGarden.com](http://TheFloridaGarden.com); or write to 11691 Dawn Cowrie Drive, Fort Myers, FL 33908.



FILE PHOTO  
A fast-growing earleaf acacia. The Peelings' Lantana nursery sold many in the 1980s to retirees who wanted instant shade.

## Downed acacia? Just blame me

By TOM PEELING  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

I am personally responsible for many, if not most, of the earleaf acacia trees in suburban Lantana and Lake Worth, and parts of Greenacres.

I won't take blame for those planted by developers, only those by homeowners. And a few homeowner associations.

Yes, many of those trees in subdivisions known as

The Fountains, Buttonwood, Poinciana Place, Lee's Crossing, Lakes of Sherbrooke and many others got their start because of me.

In the early 1980s, while working in my family's wholesale and retail nursery business, I loaded hundreds, and maybe thousands, of those brittle little saplings into fleets of Buick Regal and Cadillac Fleetwood trunks.

I've cleared the air. It's my fault. Sorry.

While driving around after Hurricane Frances, I saw lots of my 20-year-old handiwork. Most of it was not in the ground but on the ground.

Alas, that is the plight of the brittle acacia. That is the plight of homeowners who want shade more than they want strength.

Our customers were senior citizens who didn't have 25 years to wait until a live oak grew to maturity. They didn't have the patience to wait for a mahogany to grow to full size. A poinciana tree? Too slow, with no leaves in winter while the snowbirds were here. They bloomed in late spring or early summer, when residents had already gone north.

Nursery folks heard

please time and time again: We're in our 70s and 80s. We want a shade tree to plant before we're planted ourselves. That's how they put it.

So, there was a simple solution: earleaf acacias. Just add water, and in two years, you'd have shade from a 6-foot sapling.

I remember trying to warn them: They're brittle. They don't like high wind.

But residents rolled the dice. We just had Hurricane David in 1979, they reasoned. What was the chance of another so soon?

Instant gratification is what we sold.

There were other trees like that, too. Carrotwoods and loads of black olives. Queen palms, Norfolk Island pines and even the occasional (gasp!) ficus tree.

If they didn't buy it from us, they'd find it someplace else. Those trees went out our gates nearly as fast as they grew.

Hurricanes and earleaf acacias don't mix. Nor do many other kinds of trees. Just take a look around town and see what's lying in driveways, streets and yards. Yellow tabebuias, ficuses, black olives, acacias, Norfolk Island pines, queen palms and carrotwoods. The list is longer, but those are the major offenders.

Now it's time to start again. Maybe folks will heed the warnings this time — the landscaping warnings.

Look around town now and see what's still standing, and in many cases, not even leaning. Consider gumbo limbos, yellow elders, live oaks and other native trees.

You might have to wait a little longer for shade, but it's worth it.

It beats cranking up the chainsaw.

Tom Peeling is Suburban Editor for The Palm Beach Post.

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Horticulturalist Gene Joyner surveys an uprooted bread-nut tree on his property. Before the storm, Joyner had more than 1,500 varieties of plants. He hasn't been able to survey his property to see what he's lost because there are so many fallen trees.

SHANNON O'BRIEN  
Staff Photographer



## Unbelievable Acres an unbelievable mess

By BARBARA MARSHALL  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

He knew it would be bad, but not like this.

"Even my neighbor said they could hear the crunching and crashing through the night. I heard the thumps as limbs popped off and onto the roof and the wind rolled it off the other side, but I still couldn't believe what I saw when I finally looked outside."

No matter how hot and miserable you are, how back sore from dragging palm fronds and tree trunks to the curb, how heartsick at the shredded mess of your garden, it's all worse for Gene Joyner.

You have a couple of trees to cut up? He's got hundreds, maybe thousands. You've got flower beds padded with rotting leaves? He's got a forest of them. As for hours of garden cleanup? He figures he might — might — be finished removing debris by Christmas. Restoration will take years.

"When you have a whole forest that's horizontal, well, that's a pretty big job," says Joyner, sounding as mild-mannered and unemotional as if he were describing the need for regular fertilization schedules.

Joyner, an urban forester with the Palm Beach County Cooperative Extension Service and longtime *Post* gardening columnist, lost much of his life's work when Frances parked her fanny on us last weekend. His 2½-acre botanical garden, a subtropical forest he dubbed Unbelievable Acres, sprouted thousands of species from around the globe.

It is utterly devastated. His 80- and 90-foot trees came crashing to the garden

floor, clear-cutting most of the jungle canopy.

### Stacked 'like cordwood'

"It was like laying a blanket over a big section of the property. Everything is lying completely flat and on top of each other like cordwood," he said late last week from his office, where he was fielding calls from people wanting to know if they could save big limbs hanging from a shred of bark or a tree whose fork had split to the ground.

His unsentimental advice? "Cut badly damaged trees back to the ground and let them resprout, or replace them."

He'll be doing a lot of both on his own property. "On the southwest corner of the yard, there were at least 75 trees. Now, only seven or eight are standing."

While most of us have been able to take stock of the toppled black olives, the split mahoganies and sadly drooping palms, Joyner can't reach large portions of his property to survey what might be saved. He doesn't know whether his greenhouse survived. The paths to it are blocked by crisscrossing limbs of huge trees, which he is slowly clearing.

"It takes 1½ hours to haul out what I can cut in 10 minutes with the chain saw," he says. Since Hurricane Ivan's cone of probability included West Palm Beach last week, he was reluctant to pile up debris that could become airborne missiles.

In one awful night, Frances destroyed what had taken Joyner nearly 35 years to create on a former cow pasture off Jog Road in suburban West Palm Beach.

He began collecting

plants in high school and started planting his paradisaical acres back in 1970. He led other passionate gardeners on collecting trips to Central America, bringing back plants to stock his own garden. Before the storm, he had more than 1,500 varieties, including 170 types of tropical fruit; countless species of aroids, gingers, heliconias, bromeliads and orchids; trees rarely seen outside their remote, native habitats; giant royal poincianas and jacarandas; and a silk oak more than 80 feet tall — whose 35-foot-wide trunk now extends horizontally over the garden.

### His garden was famous

Joyner gave public tours and held plant sales. Almost anyone in Palm Beach County with even a passing interest in plants has visited Unbelievable Acres and has — or had, before Frances — a bit of Joyner's garden growing in their own yards.

Now, like a one-man military operation, he's going in after the survivors. He starts at dawn and works until the light fades about 8 p.m.

"The small shrubs, like firebush, crotons and aralias can probably be salvaged. Gingers and heliconias will be back in six months. But I need to get under that jumble and find the small trees to see if they can be uprighted," he says.

He is working against time and the relentless subtropical sun, which has already started to fry the understory plants.

"All the stuff I had in the shadows — the dieffenbachias, Chinese evergreens — have never been exposed to direct sunlight their whole lives."

### 'I'll still have citrus'

His passion are the tropical fruit trees, some of which he introduced to Palm Beach County. Fortunately, they seem to have fared the best.

"I'll still have citrus this winter," he marvels. "Since that part of the garden is hedged in on all sides, the grove was protected. At least 100 trees are mostly OK. The jackfruit still has watermelon-sized fruit on it."

His 35-foot tall jaboticaba trees, with grape-like fruit growing directly from the trunk, are leaning over his house.

"It will make picking the fruit easier," he says. And remarkably, laughs.

Despite an entire forest being leveled around it, Joyner's house is unscathed. The tumbling limbs didn't harm a single shingle. As of late last week, power and water were another matter. Joyner had neither. And before a visit from his sister, was eating the last of two dozen eggs he'd hard-boiled before the storm.

"She brought over a Wendy's burger and a baked potato, and they tasted pretty good."

While other gardeners are still wiping away rivulets of sweat, Joyner has already begun to worry about something most South Floridians are dreaming of fondly: the cold.

"My fear is, if we get a bad winter, we could have severe cold damage because the trees kept frost from settling."

Gene Joyner is seeking weekend volunteers to help him clear his property. For information, call the Unbelievable Acres Botanic Gardens at 655-7116.



FILE PHOTO  
A close-up view of the earleaf acacia's leaves. The brittle trees don't do well in a high wind, and are considered a pest plant.

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