



Think about using bare spots in the yard as a butterfly garden with plants that attract them like pentas. **KENNETH SETZER** Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

HOME & GARDEN

# A hurricane wrecked your yard. Now what?

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Hurricanes present opportunities to start gardens and landscapes anew. While the losses of our greenery hurt, the brighter side is the chance to do things a better way.

Why do these horrible storms exist? They grow out of the right (or wrong) combinations of air and sea temperature, humidity, air pressure, the Earth’s rotation and other factors. Ecologically, perhaps they do serve a purpose; maybe they come around to clear nature’s playing field, with the storm-adapted plants and animals being the ones that survive in a kind of feedback.

This does not play into our human plans well at all. But [now’s our chance to take advantage of this clearing](#), to refurbish the garden in better ways. For example, if you are like me, you hesitate to remove healthy plants, even if they’re not in the greatest spot. Or if they are struggling, you want to give them a chance.

I had a huge firebush (*Hamelia patens*) that supported loads of bugs and birds. But it looked leggy in the extreme at the base and caused sooty mold to blacken the patio beneath it. Now, the firebush is gone. Irma made the decision for me.

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I will miss the firebush, but it just wasn’t in the right spot, and I had let its growth get out of hand.

I’d also inherited loads of plants with my house, including areca palms en masse. The arecas are indeed wonderful screens, but some are doing a bit too well, shading out other plants, dropping loads of dead fronds, and encroaching on pavement. They survived, but are ragged. Now I can pull the ragged ones and feel a little less guilty.

I also had three tall coconut palms — too tall for a small suburban yard. These normally do well in storms, but the tallest of the three, which stood at the southern end of my yard, was blown north during the storm. Hurricanes spin counterclockwise, and Miami-Dade got the eastern side of the storm, thus all the northern-pointing foliage around town. The coconut palm fell north into the pool. While I’d like to leave it and pretend the pool is a tropical lagoon, that won’t do for long.



Areas newly cleared by Hurricane Irma are open for opportunity.  
**KENNETH SETZER** - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

Now what to do with the newly freed space? There are two options: Nothing, or use plants that are better suited for location and storms.

Doing nothing is a good plan; I don’t always stick to the “less is more” aesthetic, but it is often the best route. When I clear the underbrush, I can better see and appreciate the trees and plants I uncover. The palm was better suited to an open area, not against a fence, so I think the spot where that tall palm recently stood so gracefully will remain empty.

Or then again, perhaps I’ll clear it out and plant a small butterfly garden in the few square yards opened up. I grow a shrub eupatorium (*Koanophyllon villosum*) there already. It was constantly getting bashed by falling coconuts, but always recovered. Butterflies and moths love it. Maybe I can add a firebush to the background — kept to shrub height this time — along with a wild coffee for filler and height toward the fence. Butterflies love its flowers also.

Nearer the pavement, *Pentas lanceolata* (a coffee relative) makes a pretty border good for moths, butterflies and skippers. It comes in many varieties, offering flowers in pinks, reds, purples and white. Maybe, too, a sitting area with potted plants would work. Ah, more yard toil!

For replacing trees, natives usually fare well, but not always. Live oaks seemed unperturbed, gumbo limbos dropped limbs in Irma’s grasp as is their survival strategy, and poincianas seemed mostly to remain standing. This might be a good chance for you to plant a mango tree if space has opened up.



*Sterculia urens*, an unusual tree rarely available, is wind resistant.  
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While Fairchild has [naturally lost trees](#), and previously shaded areas are now open to the harsh sun, this is an opportunity to incorporate some of the plants being raised at our nursery, some of which have rarely been grown in a U.S. botanic garden. Some of these will be offered at our [Members’ Day Plant Sale](#) on Oct. 7. The sale offers plants large and small, edibles, ornamentals, natives and exotics, like the unusual *Sterculia urens*, a tree noted as wind resistant, or bay rum tree (*Pimenta racemosa*), which I’m grateful survived in my own yard.

It’s time now for cleanup — and renewal.

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