



Don't Top Trees!

People top trees for many reasons, all of them connected to falsehoods and misconceptions. Think of tree topping as a really bad hair cut that could kill you.

Myth: Topping a tree will reduce storm damage and make the tree easier to maintain.

Truth: Topped trees can regain their original height in as fast as 2 years. The fast growing, extremely long and loosely attached shoots caused by topping may be more susceptible to breakage and storm damage. Ultimately, a topped tree requires more attention in the future than a properly pruned tree.

Myth: Topping invigorates a tree.

Truth: Topping immediately injures a tree and starts it on a downward spiral. Topping wounds expose a tree to decay and invasion from insects and disease. Also, the loss of foliage starves the tree, which weakens the roots, reducing the tree's structural strength. While a tree may survive topping, its life span will be significantly reduced.

Myth: Topped trees will add value to your property.

Truth: Topped trees lack natural beauty and may reduce your property values. Also, a topped tree can become hazardous and cause property damage, making it a liability.

The sight of topped trees is all too common in the communities and roadways of America. We admire the trees with their green and lush foliage.

As more is learned about the long-term effects of tree topping, the more senseless this practice becomes. Topping is unnecessary stress and increased risk to the tree's health. It is also a self-defeating exercise usually not worth the expense, and the results pose a danger from rot and weakly attached new growth. Topping is the absolute worst thing you can do for the health of your tree.

Trees are often topped because they grow into utility wires, interfere with views or sunlight, or simply grow so large that they worry the owner.

Eight Good Reasons- Why NOT to “Top”

1. **Starvation:** Good pruning practices rarely remove more than 1/4 to 1/3 of the crown, which in turn does not seriously interfere with the ability of a tree's leafy crown to manufacture food. Topping removes so much of the crown that it upsets an older tree's well-developed crown-to-root ratio and temporarily cuts off its food-making ability.
2. **Shock:** A tree's crown is like an umbrella that shields much of the tree from the direct rays of the sun. By suddenly removing this protection, the remaining bark tissue is so exposed that scalding may result. There may also be a dramatic effect on neighboring trees and shrubs. If these thrive in the shade and the shade is removed, poor health or death may result.
3. **Insects and Disease:** The large stubs of a topped tree have a difficult time forming callus. The terminal location of these cuts, as well as their large diameter, prevent the tree's chemically based natural defense system from doing its job. The stubs are highly vulnerable to insect invasion and the spore of decay fungi. If decay is already present in the limb, opening the limb will speed the spread of the disease.
4. **Weak Limbs:** At best, the wood of a new limb that sprouts after a larger limb is truncated is more weakly attached than a limb that develops normally. If rot exists or develops at the severed end of the limb, the weight of the sprout makes a bad situation even worse.
5. **Rapid New Growth:** The goal of topping is usually to control the height and spread of a tree. Actually, it has just the opposite effect. The resulting sprouts (often called water sprouts) are far more numerous than normal new growth and they elongate so rapidly that the tree returns to its original height in a very short time-and with a far more dense and dangerous crown.
6. **Tree Death:** Some species of trees are less tolerant to topping than others. Beeches, for example, do not sprout readily after severe pruning and the reduced foliage most surely will lead to death of the tree.
7. **Ugliness:** A topped tree is a disfigured tree. Even with its re-growth it never regains the grace and the character of its species. The landscape and the community are robbed of a valuable asset.
8. **Cost:** To a worker with a saw, topping a tree is much easier than applying the skill and judgment needed for good pruning. Therefore, topping may cost less in the short run. However, the true costs of topping are hidden. These include: reduced property value, the expense of removal and replacement of the tree dies, the loss of other trees and shrubs if they succumb to changed light conditions, the risk of liability from weakened branches, and increased future maintenance.



There Is a Better Way: Alternatives to Topping

As a homeowner, you must educate yourself and make wise choices to protect your home and property - including your trees. A tree is a valuable asset. As a long-term investment, trees require careful decisions and the occasional advice and service of a professional. Here's what you can do to protect your trees:

Hire only competent, insured and certified tree care professionals.

When seeking a tree service, check the company's topping policy. If they say top, don't let them near your trees.

Find out if the individual or company carries professional certification, particularly through the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA). The ISA conducts extensive course and certifies those that pass an industry-based exam.

Most importantly, never let yourself be pressured by bargains. The old saying, "you get what you pay for" truly applies here.

An Ounce of Prevention: Right Tree, Right Place

In order to grow into a healthy mature tree, every species of tree has different height, width and spacing requirement. Carefully matching your tree selection with site conditions - proximity to other trees, buildings or above ground utilities - can prevent problems before they occur and will eliminate the need to take harmful, drastic measures. Many utility companies and forestry agencies provide guidelines for planting trees and recommendations of tree species to fit your needs. Trees are a long-term investment. You have the ability - and the responsibility - to prevent future problems by applying the practice of "the right tree in the right place."

Information Resources

For more information about caring for your trees, and brochures that explain in greater detail about proper tree pruning and tree selection, contact the organization below.

National Arbor Day Foundation can provide information about tree planting and proper pruning:

100 Arbor Avenue
Nebraska City, NE 68410

(402) 474-5655

<http://www.arborday.org>

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