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Why tree topping is bad?

Besides creating an ugly tree, topping is bad for several reasons:

- **Starvation**: A tree stores food in its leaves. Topping starves the tree by taking too much of its food supply.
- **Sunburn**: The tree and surrounding plants are no longer protected from direct sun and scalding can occur.
- **Insects and Disease**: Wounds from topping make a tree more vulnerable to insect and disease.
- **Short-lived Results**: Topping actually encourages the tree to fill in three times as thick! The wind can't move easily through the dense growth making the tree more susceptible to storm damage.

Proper pruning is the best way to control tree growth. Pruning thins the tree's crown and reduces its height and spread. As a result, it keeps the tree healthy and beautiful.

The harmful effects of tree topping are explained in greater detail in the article below from the International Society of Arboriculture* which is also available online at: http://www.treesaregood.com/treecare/topping.aspx.

What is Topping?

Topping is the indiscriminate cutting of tree branches to stubs or lateral branches that are not large enough to assume the terminal role. Other names for topping include "heading," "tipping," "hat-racking," and "rounding over."


Topping is cutting branches back to stubs or lateral branches not large enough to sustain the remaining branch.

The most common reason given for topping is to reduce the size of a tree. Home owners often feel that their trees have become too large for their property. People fear that tall trees may pose a hazard. Topping, however, is not a viable method of height reduction and certainly does not reduce the hazard. In fact, topping will make a tree more hazardous in the long term.


New shoots develop profusely below a topping cut.

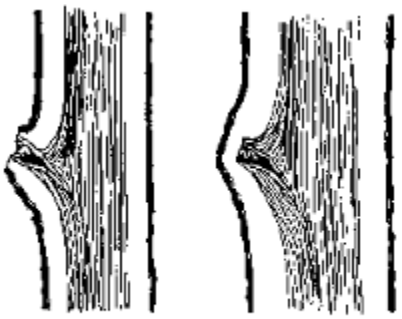
Topping Stresses Trees

Topping often removes 50 to 100 percent of the leaf-bearing crown of a tree. Because leaves are the food factories of a tree, removing them can temporarily starve a tree. The severity of the pruning triggers a sort of survival mechanism. The tree activates latent buds, forcing the rapid growth of multiple shoots below each cut. The tree needs to put out a new crop of leaves as

soon as possible. If a tree does not have the stored energy reserves to do so, it will be seriously weakened and may die.

A stressed tree is more vulnerable to insect and disease infestations. Large, open pruning wounds expose the sapwood and heartwood to attacks. The tree may lack sufficient energy to chemically defend the wounds against invasion, and some insects are actually attracted to the chemical signals trees release.

Topping Causes Decay



The tree will close a well-positioned cut as new wood is produced. Normally it will compartmentalize any internal decay.

The preferred location to make a pruning cut is just beyond the branch collar at the branch's point of attachment. The tree is biologically equipped to close such a wound, provided the tree is healthy enough and the wound is not too large. Cuts made along a limb between lateral branches create stubs with wounds that the tree may not be able to close. The exposed wood tissues begin to decay. Normally, a tree will "wall off," or compartmentalize, the decaying tissues, but few trees can defend the multiple severe wounds caused by topping. The decay organisms are given a free path to move down through the branches.

Leaving a stub maintains an open pathway to decay.

Topping Can Lead to Sunburn

Branches within a tree's crown produce thousands of leaves to absorb sunlight. When the leaves are removed, the remaining branches and trunk are suddenly exposed to high levels of light and heat. The result may be sunburn of the tissues beneath the bark, which can lead to cankers, bark splitting, and death of some branches.

Stubs left from topping usually decay. The shoots that are produced below the cut are weakly attached, and often become a hazard.

Topping Creates Hazards

The survival mechanism that causes a tree to produce multiple shoots below each topping cut comes at great expense to the tree. These shoots develop from buds near the surface of the old branches. Unlike normal branches that develop in a socket of overlapping wood tissues, these new shoots are anchored only in the outermost layers of the parent branches.

The new shoots grow quickly, as much as 20 feet in one year, in some species. Unfortunately, the shoots are prone to breaking, especially during windy conditions. The irony is that while the goal was to reduce the tree's height to make it safer, it has been made more hazardous than before.

Topping Makes Trees Ugly

The natural branching structure of a tree is a biological wonder. Trees form a variety of shapes and growth habits, all with the same goal of presenting their

Trees that have been topped may become hazardous and are unsightly.

leaves to the sun. Topping removes the ends of the branches, often leaving ugly stubs. Topping destroys the natural form of a tree.

Without leaves (up to 6 months of the year in temperate climates), a topped tree appears disfigured and mutilated. With leaves, it is a dense ball of foliage, lacking its simple grace. A tree that has been topped can never fully regain its natural form.

Topping Is Expensive

The cost of topping a tree is not limited to what the perpetrator is paid. If the tree survives, it will require pruning again within a few years. It will either need to be reduced again or storm damage will have to be cleaned up. If the tree dies, it will have to be removed.

Topping is a high-maintenance pruning practice, with some hidden costs. One is the reduction in property value. Healthy, well-maintained trees can add 10 to 20 percent to the value of a property. Disfigured, topped trees are considered an impending expense.

Another possible cost of topped trees is potential liability. Topped trees are prone to breaking and can be hazardous. Because topping is considered an unacceptable pruning practice, any damage caused by branch failure of a topped tree may lead to a finding of negligence in a court of law.

If the height of a tree must be reduced, all cuts should be made to strong laterals or to the parent limb. Do not cut limbs back to stubs.

Alternatives to Topping

Sometimes a tree must be reduced in height or spread. Providing clearance for utility lines is an example. There are recommended techniques for doing so. If practical, branches should be removed back to their point of origin. If a branch must be shortened, it should be cut back to a lateral that is large enough to assume the terminal role. A rule of thumb is to cut back to a lateral that is at least one-third the diameter of the limb being removed.

This method of branch reduction helps to preserve the natural form of the tree. However, if large cuts are involved, the tree may not be able to close over and compartmentalize the wounds. Sometimes the best solution is to remove the tree and replace it with a species that is more appropriate for the site.

Hiring an Arborist

Pruning large trees can be dangerous. If pruning involves working above the ground or using power equipment, it is best to hire a professional arborist. An arborist can determine the type of pruning that is necessary to improve the health, appearance, and safety of your trees. A professional arborist can provide the services of a trained crew, with all of the required safety equipment and liability insurance.

Professional arborists can determine what type of pruning is necessary to improve the health, appearance and safety of your trees.

When selecting an arborist,

- check for membership in professional organizations such as the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA), the Tree Care Industry

Association (TCIA), or the American Society of Consulting Arborists (ASCA). Such membership demonstrates a willingness on the part of the arborist to stay up to date on the latest techniques and information.

- check for ISA arborist certification. Certified Arborists are experienced professionals who have passed an extensive examination covering all aspects of tree care.
- ask for proof of insurance.
- ask for a list of references, and don't hesitate to check them.
- avoid using the services of any tree company that
    - advertises topping as a service provided. Knowledgeable arborists know that topping is harmful to trees and is not an accepted practice.
    - uses tree climbing spikes to climb trees that are being pruned. Climbing spikes can damage trees, and their use should be limited to trees that are being removed.