

Dangers of Tree Topping

What is tree topping?

Proper pruning is an important aspect of tree maintenance, but it is not the same as topping. Tree topping is the blatant removal of the top portion of the tree canopy which leaves stubs and lateral branches that are not large enough to take over as the main branches. Despite topping being the most damaging type of pruning, it is an all too common occurrence in our community.

Why is topping performed?

Topping is often performed to reduce a tree's size when it has outgrown its location, such as under power lines. Homeowners sometimes fear large trees near their homes when topping actually increases the level of risk and maintenance costs in the long term. The practice of topping is not an industry accepted pruning practice, yet this service is generally offered by so called 'arborists' that often have no professional tree care credentials.

How does topping negatively impact tree health?

- Topping often removes well over 50% of a tree's leaf bearing crown where its food is produced. Temporary starvation and significant stress trigger the activation of dormant buds and utilization of stored energy reserves to produce new shoots below each cut. As a result, the tree is weakened and less able to defend against insects and diseases.
- When a branch is pruned in the proper location (just outside the branch collar), a healthy tree can close the wound to prevent decay. When a tree is topped, the random large cuts on the branches may not be able to close which creates easy entry points for decay organisms.
- After topping, a multitude of shoots below each cut begin to emerge. The new shoots grow rapidly and are weakly attached, making them highly susceptible to breaking during wind or ice events.
- Abruptly exposing the crown to full sunlight can cause sunburn of branch tissue under the bark. Cankers can form, bark may split, and the branch may even die.

Topping trees often increases future maintenance costs by creating the need for corrective pruning to either reduce the crown or repair storm damage. It can also reduce property value as much as 10-20% due to the trees being more of a liability than asset to the property. Shade can be severely reduced which can lead to higher cooling costs and less privacy. Topping permanently disfigures the tree's natural growth pattern and diminishes its visual appeal.

Topping alternatives

Reduction pruning is an industry accepted method to selectively reduce the length of any branches that need clearance from utility lines or houses. The selected limb should be pruned back to a lateral branch that is large enough (at least one-third the diameter of the limb being removed) to become the new terminal branch. Reduction pruning strives to maintain the tree's natural form. It is also important to consider a tree's mature height and the surrounding objects (such as power lines) when planting a new tree. For further assistance, contact your local ISA Certified Arborist.

Sustainable Landscaping

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Example of tree topping. L. Drunasky
(you may want to photoshop the reindeer out)