

## What Is Topping?

Topping is the drastic removal or cutting back of large branches in mature trees. The tree is pruned much as a hedge is sheared and the main branches are cut to stubs. Topping is also referred to as heading, stubbing or dehorning.

## Why Are Trees Topped?

Many homeowners have their trees topped, often by so-called professionals when their trees have reached heights which they consider unsafe. They fear a strong wind might blow these large trees over. This fear is largely unjustified. The extensive root system of a healthy tree, if left relatively undisturbed, provides adequate support for the tree.

# Don't Top Trees

## Why NOT To "Top"—Eight Good Reasons

- **Starvation:** Good pruning practices rarely remove more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{3}$  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.
- **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 shade and the shade is removed, poor health or death may result.
- **Insects and Disease:** The large stubs of a topped tree have a difficult time healing the wound. 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 spores of decay fungi. If decay is already present in the limb, opening the limb will speed the spread of the disease.
- **Weak Limbs:** The wood of a new limb that sprouts after a larger limb is truncated is more weakly attached than a



limb that develops more normally. If rot exists or develops at the severed end of the limb, the weight of the sprout makes a bad situation even worse.

- **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. 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.
- **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 likely will lead to death of the tree.
- **Ugliness:** A topped tree is a disfigured tree. Even with its regrowth it never regains the grace and character of its species. The landscape and the community are robbed of a valuable asset.
- **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 if 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.

### Alternatives To Topping

- ✓ Start out right by planting trees that will fit your available space *when they reach maturity*.
- ✓ Begin proper pruning early in the life of a tree.
- ✓ To slow growth of a tree, avoid the use of nitrogen fertilizer.
- ✓ Prune properly and regularly. A light pruning every three years will keep your tree in healthy condition. It will also have less drastic effects on both the landscape and your financial assets compared with neglecting older trees or resorting to topping.
- ✓ Don't plant trees under utility lines.



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