

WHAT'S WRONG WITH TOPPING?

There's a lot wrong with topping (reducing the height of a tree by sawing off its top limbs or reducing the length of a limb by removing the end.). For one thing, it's the quickest way to ruin a tree's appearance forever. For another, it doesn't even reduce the tree's height or width for very long. A tree does not grow back in a natural-looking way when its limbs are pruned to stubs. The result of this type of pruning stimulates very vigorous, upright growth and the tree sends out scores of shoots from the cutoff points, resulting in a "feather duster" effect. The effect is one of many brooms, bristle *end* up, atop the tree or at the end of the branches. These shoots also tend to be taller, coarser, denser, and more weakly attached than the natural top or end of the branch was.

This poor pruning practice may even cut short the life of the tree. Not only does it expose the resultant large wounds to decay and insect attack, but it removes much of the leafy growth needed to manufacture sugars. Moreover, the weak growth stimulated by this practice is always more subject to breakage.

Some topped trees can eventually recover their form, but it may take decades. A good professional arborist will not top a tree that has grown too large for its space, but instead will gradually scale it back by making thinning cuts to lower branches using drop-crotch pruning techniques. Thinning cuts will preserve the tree's natural shape and won't produce a lot of vigorous regrowth.

Why NOT to "Top" Trees— Eight Good Reasons

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 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 spores 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 anew 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.
5. **Rapid New Growth:** The goal of topping is usually to control the height and spread of a tree. Actually, it has 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 denser crown.
6. **Tree Death:** Some older trees are more tolerant to topping than others. Beeches, for example, do not sprout readily after severe pruning and the reduced foliage most surely will lead to the death of the tree.
7. **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.
8. **Cost:** To a worker with a saw, topping a tree is much easier than applying the skill and judgment of good pruning. Therefore, lopping 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.