

WHY TOPPING HURTS TREES

Topping is the indiscriminate cutting back of tree branches to stubs or lateral branches, which aren't large enough to assume the terminal role.

Topping can stress trees because it may remove a large percentage of the leaf-bearing crown of the tree. Leaves are the food factories of a tree, therefore topping removes this resource and can stress the tree greatly, cause decay or even expose a tree to sunburn.

Topping Creates Hazards

Trees will usually produce multiple shoots below each topping cut as a survival mechanism. Unfortunately this can create a hazard for the tree. Shoots that develop near the surface of the old branches are different from the shoots that develop in normal branching development of trees. These shoots can grow very quickly but are prone to breaking, especially during windy conditions, like those we have been experiencing in our area.

Topping Can Be Ugly as Well as Expensive

Obviously topping changes the natural branching structure and form of a tree. The tree may appear mutilated, or at the least, awkward. It can never regain its natural form. The expense of topping the tree comes from the fact that it will need pruning soon again in a few years to either restore a more natural appearance, or to deal with broken branches.



This tree was topped



Proper pruning

Reducing Size in a Safe Way

The solution is simple then; don't top a tree. What do you do if your tree needs to be reduced in size? If a tree needs to be reduced in size, have a professional arborist do this. When practical, branches should be removed back to their point of origin.

If limbs need to be removed, they should be cut back to a lateral that is at least one third the diameter of the limb being removed.

As much as possible, the goal is to maintain the natural form and shape of the tree. If a tree is too large for its location, let a professional arborist advise you if the tree needs to be removed and replaced with a species that is more appropriate for the location.

Also refer to our information on “Pruning Mature Tree”.

Additional references:

www.treesaregood.com

www.tlcfortrees.info/topping_trees_hurts.htm

www.ci.milpitas.ca.gov/_pdfs/pw_got_trees_110107.pdf