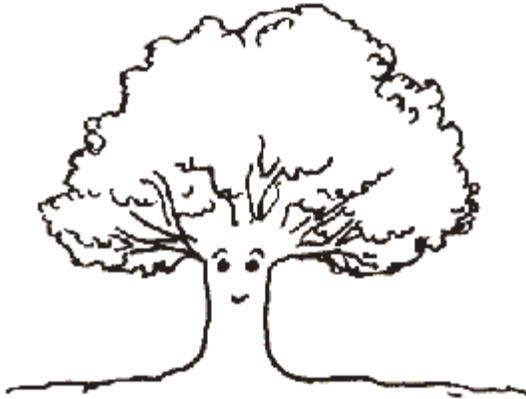


## Don't Top: 5 Reasons Not to Top

By Cass Turnbull

### What's wrong with topping?

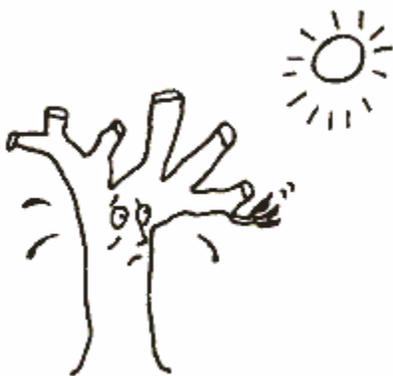


The misguided practice of tree topping (also referred to as stubbing, dehorning, pollarding, heading, and by several other euphemisms) has risen to crisis proportions nationally over the last decade. Topping has become the urban forest's major threat, dramatically shortening the lifespan of trees and creating hazardous trees in high-traffic areas.

The importance of trees to the urban and global ecology is only now becoming fully known and appreciated. This dawning has not yet been accompanied by adequate public education and sound public policy to ensure tree survival and our own safety.

**DON'T TURN YOUR VALUABLE COMMUNITY ASSETS INTO LEGAL, AESTHETIC AND ECONOMIC LIABILITIES! PLEASE READ AND CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING**

### 1. IT WON'T WORK.



Topping won't work to keep trees small. After a deciduous tree is topped, its growth rate increases. It grows back rapidly in an attempt to replace its missing leaf area. It needs all of its leaves so that it can manufacture food for the trunk and roots. It won't slow down until it reaches about the same size it was before it was topped. It takes at maximum a few years before your tree returns to near its original size.

An exception to the grow-back-to-size rule comes if you damage a tree's health so it hasn't the strength to re-establish itself. It is, in effect, dying and will continue on a downward spiral for years. Topping can't make a significant size difference-not for long. The species or type of tree you have determines its size. A dogwood or Japanese maple may grow from 10 to 30 feet in its life, an oak or an ash from 10 to 90 feet. You can't "stop" trees with topping. If you succeed, you have killed them.

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## 2. IT'S EXPENSIVE.

A topped tree must be done and re-done every few years. And it eventually must be removed when it dies or the owner gives up. Each time a branch is cut, numerous long, skinny young shoots (called suckers or watersprouts) grow rapidly back to replace it. They must be cut and recut, but they always regrow the next year making the job exponentially more difficult. Much like the many-headed Hydra snake that Hercules battled, people create maintenance monsters in their back yards. A properly pruned tree stays "done" longer, since the work does not stimulate an upsurge of regrowth. Proper pruning actually improves the health and beauty of a tree, costing you less in the long run.

Topping also reduces the appraised value of your tree. A tree, like any landscape amenity, adds to the value of your property. Appraisers subtract hundreds of dollars from the value of a tree when it's been topped (using the International Society of Arboriculture's guidelines for evaluation). You can even sue a tree company for wrongfully topping a tree.

## 3. IT'S UGLY.

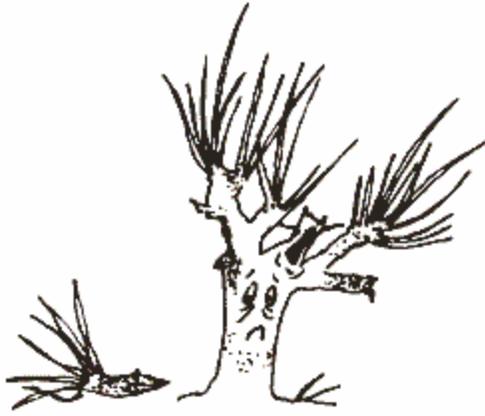


The sight of a topped tree is offensive to many people. The freshly sawed-off tree limbs are reminiscent of arm or leg amputations. And the freshly-sawed look is just the beginning of the eyesore; the worst is yet to come as the tree regrows a witch's broom of ugly, straight suckers and sprouts.

The natural beauty of the tree's crown is a function of the uninterrupted taper from the trunk to ever finer and more delicate branches, and the regular division of the branches. Arborists consider the topping of some trees a criminal act, since a tree's 90-year achievement of natural beauty can be destroyed in a couple of hours.

Topping destroys the winter silhouette of a tree. The regrowth of suckers or shoots will bloom poorly, if at all. Some trees will reestablish themselves after many years-but by then they will be the same size as before. Many topped trees are considered a total loss.

## 4. IT'S DANGEROUS.



According to Dr. Alex Shigo, world renowned scientist and author on the subject of arboriculture (trees), topping is the most serious injury you can inflict upon your tree. Severe topping and repeat topping can set up internal columns of rotten wood, the ill effect of which may show up years later in conjunction with a drought or other stress.

Ironically, many people top their trees because they think it will make them safer. Topping creates hazardous trees. In many cities, topping is banned because of the public safety factor and the potential for lawsuits.

Topping creates a hazardous tree in four ways:

- **IT ROTTS.** Topping opens the tree up to an invasion of rotting organisms. A tree can defend itself from rot when side branches are removed, but it has a hard time walling off the pervasive rot caused by a topping cut. Rotted individual limbs-or the entire tree-may fail as a result, often years later.
- **IT STARVES.** Very simply, a tree's leaves manufacture its food. Repeated removal of the tree's leaves-its food source-literally starves the tree. This makes it susceptible to secondary diseases such as root rot---a common cause of failing trees.
- **WEAK LIMBS.** New limbs made from the sucker or shoot regrowth are weakly attached and break easily in wind or snow storms-even many years later when they are large and heavy. A regrown limb never has the structural integrity of the original.
- **INCREASED WIND RESISTANCE.** The thick regrowth of suckers or sprouts resulting from topping make the tree top-heavy and more likely to catch the wind. This increases the chance of blow-down in a storm. Selectively-thinned trees allow the wind to pass through the branches. It's called "taking the sail out" of a tree.

## 5. MAKES YOU LOOK BAD.

Topping makes you appear to be a cruel or foolish person. Your friends know you better. But the more your neighbors come to understand topping for what it is, the lower you will fall in their esteem. You may top a tree to create a water view, but you should know that you have

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some friends and neighbors-who probably won't say so because they are being tactful-who see a view of a butchered tree with water in the background.

Still not convinced? Here are even more reasons:

- "[How to Avoid Being Clipped by a Tree Trimmer](#)", Steve Sandfort and Edwin C. Butcher, Flower and Garden Magazine, April 1988
- "[Topping – the Most Expensive Part of Pruning](#)", Alden Kelley, Arbor Age, November 1985
- "[Warning – Topping is Hazardous to Your Tree's Health](#)", C.A. Kalser et al, Journal of Arboriculture, February 1986
- "[Are you a Candidate for a Lawsuit?](#)", Randall S. Stamen, Arbor Age, July 1994 (do not include ads or significant new case law)
- [Letter to PlantAmnesty from Jon Krupnick, Attorney At Law](#), December 26, 1989, Barcia case
- "[The Myth of Tree Topping](#)", Linda Chalker-Scott, Washington State Nursery & Landscape Association B&B Newsletter, Sept. 2003
- "[Saving Trees and Views](#)", Sunset Magazine, May 1989
- "[Conifer Topping – It May be Common, But is it Right?](#)", John Hushagen, Tree Care Industry Magazine, July 1992