

## PlantAmnesty—To End Unsustainable Pruning (Tree Topping and Shrub Shearing)

By Cass Turnbull

PlantAmnesty's goal is to end bad pruning. Over the past 24 years, we have teamed up with the ISA and the Washington State Department of Natural Resources to do just that. The ISA provided the certification program, funding, and volunteers. The Department of Natural Resources provided annual grant funding. Nurseries, home gardeners, extension agents, media and horticulturalists joined and supported our educational work. PlantAmnesty certified its own gardeners and landscapers by devising and administering a test.

### **Raising Awareness—Creating the Demand for Good Pruning**

PlantAmnesty excelled at raising public awareness of the problem by utilizing the media in ways not available to professional organizations. The combination of humor, controversy, and helpful programming has been extremely effective. As a result, tree topping went from being the dominate form of pruning to a rarity in the Seattle area. Many also heard about and saw pictures in the paper and on TV of nuisance shearing.

In the beginning, just one gardener set a goal to end bad pruning in a professional seminar. What started as a mental exercise took off like a rocket, almost on its own. The name PlantAmnesty was humorous, challenging, and expressed exactly what we do and how we do it. Because of PlantAmnesty's mock-militant stance, people became interested; an organization called PlantAmnesty thus achieved what a Society for Better Pruning never could. The catch phrase *to end the senseless torture and mutilation of trees and shrubs caused by mal-pruning* made people laugh AND stated the problem. Our first goal was to *raise awareness of the problem of poor plant management*. Initially several articles were written and submitted to local professional magazines, gardening journals, and other publications. Rather than being simply a description of proper pruning, these articles pull no punches and directly address the problem in no uncertain terms. The articles were titled *Birch Butchery*, *Cherry Stripping*, and *Poodleballing—Sport of Kings*. They immediately got published in the smaller publications. A large Seattle newspaper decided to do a story on

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PlantAmnesty rather than publishing the diatribes themselves. This media coverage gave the new organization the authenticity it needed and, at the same time, alerted a readership of over 300,000 that there may be something seriously wrong in their own back yards. The founder, Cass Turnbull, took photos and began giving the Slideshow of Pruning Horrors to master gardeners and garden clubs. By being humorous and informative, the slide show became popular. It defined good and bad pruning and made attendees unable to ignore the blight in their neighborhoods. Along with that came an educational display—*The Hall of Shame*, which debuted at an open house at the Center for Urban Horticulture in Seattle. The display showed posters of wildly mal-pruned trees and shrubs with humorous titles. People loved it. People wanted to join, people wanted to help, especially the *ONLY* three tree services in Seattle that DID NOT TOP TREES at the time. The manpower and funding supplied by those arborists allowed PlantAmnesty to start. We signed up members, sent them a newsletter, and began our work.

**Media coverage**—on radio, in newspapers and magazines, and on TV—continued to be the mainstay of the outreach campaign. Over the years we have averaged eight major and minor media events per year, year in and year out, ever since. Coverage comes not just from horticultural media outlets but also evening news broadcasts, hot talk radio, the Wall Street Journal, the Australian Broadcast System, the Canadian Broadcast System, the Mennonite news, an in-flight magazine, soap operas, Christian TV, and the Jay Leno show. Curiosity piqued by a PlantAmnesty bumper sticker resulted in an AP article published in 42 states. The name PlantAmnesty intrigues reporters; on the other hand, it puts off many potential grantors and sponsors. Letter-writing campaigns followed every printed and weather-broadcast recommendation for tree topping—a frequent occurrence in the late '80s. Though no retractions followed, we did change the corporate media culture over time. Now most storms are followed by a warning NOT to top trees in the news features that follow.

## Providing Solutions

Our second goal has been to *Provide Solutions*. After creating a demand for better pruning, PlantAmnesty responded with how-to information (classes, literature, books and DVDs), a referral service of people who really do know how to prune, and free pruning for needy and deserving landscapes and trees. The referral service tested gardeners and the ISA certification program tested arborists, allowing us to locate those with the requisite knowledge.

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PlantAmnesty's ethics statement, description of disallowed practices, and the sponsorship requirement assured a level of quality work upon which the public has come to depend. We tracked and published not only our own pruning classes, but also those provided by others. Currently our Master Pruner series is also made available. These presentations were digitized and placed on YouTube with funds from the Washington State Department of Natural Resources and the USDA Forest Service. Funding from ISA arborists (mainly through PlantAmnesty's Arborist Work Day) and from our local members have continued to make PlantAmnesty possible. With that money we created numerous educational brochures including *Saving Trees and Views*, Pruning Guides, bought billboard space, created and aired Public Service Announcements, started the Heritage Tree Program, and generally continued to serve the trees and shrubs of Seattle.

## **Support**

In the past 24 years, we have garnered 1,200 members, evenly divided between home gardeners, professional gardeners, and arborists. Members provide the major funding for PlantAmnesty, which has a \$120,000 annual budget.

## **Measuring Results**

We measured our progress over those years by analyzing the Yellow Page Ads under Tree Services that listed Tree Topping as a service in their display ads. In 1990, 61% listed tree topping, though it should be noted that the actual incidence of topping of large trees was much higher, probably 90% of the trees that were serviced were topped. In 2001, that number was 23% of the advertisements, and in 2011, the number was 0%. Tree topping was not going to end on its own. It was regarded as an impossible goal, foolhardy to pursue, as have been ending smoking in bars and stopping drunk driving. Tree topping, like all forms of mal-pruning, is on the rise due to the recession, though the big trees suffer a great deal less than those 20 feet and under being topped by unqualified landscapers.

The Shear Madness campaign fared less well. The recession resulted in homeowners and property managers cutting back their landscape budgets. Simultaneously we saw a large increase of unemployed, unskilled landscape labor flooding the market. As a result, poor pruning practices have become the norm especially for commercial and multi-family properties. And we foolishly thought the shearing problem couldn't get any worse.

## Campaigning in Your Community

PlantAmnesty tried and failed in the creation of several chapters. They were all successful at spreading the word via the media, but the leaders tended to burn out or be brought down by their own people. It is especially hard to transplant the humor (and, by the way, we are not funny, it turns out, in any way shape or form in Italy!) Therefore, no new PlantAmnesty chapter is forthcoming. On the other hand, you are encouraged to begin your own campaign. Advice on doing so follows:

1. **Hire Somebody.** Spend your time finding ways to support that person, mostly with financing. The best person for the job is **not** a professional arborist or landscaper since the media and public suspect self-interest or professional jealousy may be at work (though a personal crusade to end topping can result in more work from better customers). If you find a local concerned citizen or gardener who is passionate about ending topping, adopt them and train them in the ways of arboriculture and professional landscaping. Second best is to encourage your local city arborist, parks superintendent to make it their mission to upgrade practices in their community or ask your local ISA chapter to run an anti-topping campaign, though these people may lack the ability to be, shall we say, colorfully descriptive of the problem.
2. **Stay Negative.** You will get people who say things like, *You catch more flies with honey than vinegar* and *Why don't you show pictures of good pruning?* Ignore them. Nobody stops at a booth or attends a slideshow on *How to Care for Your Trees*. They want to see *Six Ways to Kill Your Tree*, or *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. A simple flip chart that says, *Don't top trees—ask me why* will get the public to engage at your boothing event. A physical tree with girdling, flush cuts, gaff marks, and topping cuts (labeled) will engage people. Good pruning does not show up on film or even in illustrations, but having a how-to brochure handy is quite useful.
3. **Pick the Low-Hanging Fruit.** Ask your garden columnists to do stories on *Why Not to Top Trees* and *Why Not to Shear non-hedge Plants*. Write and send articles to small neighborhood newspapers, write a letter to the editor, or advertise that you do NOT top trees, that you Do Not Shear non- hedge Plants.

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4. **Collect Your Support Group.** If you have an event, slideshow, boothing, or, as we sometimes do, a mutilated tree protest, or, if you get media coverage, be sure to make yourself VERY available with phone and email, AND collect all the contact info of everyone who expresses support. You will need these people later for a public hearing, for money, for volunteer help, for many things. PlantAmnesty's choice of words about members is *One ranting woman is a kook, two thousand members is a movement.*
5. **Get It Done.** Don't plan to make it better, plan to work yourself out of the job. Set an unreasonable goal and a deadline to end tree topping in a given geographical area. Then work backwards to figure out what has to happen. This will cause you to create action steps that are effective enough to make a dent in the problem. Otherwise, you will have disappointingly small results. As I say to my crew, "Let's work like we're trying to get something done!"
6. **Don't Forget the Money.** If you actually intend to end tree topping in your area, you will need not only a support group, but also money. Good sources are arborists, ISA chapters, state urban forestry grantors, power utilities, nurseries (in kind donations) and membership dues if you start a Friends of Trees or another nonprofit group.

## Shear Madness and Political Action

The PlantAmnesty campaign was launched to prove that ending topping could be done in a defined geographical area. Now that topping has abated, we have engaged in other ventures including the previously neglected SHEAR MADNESS campaign (to end common indefensible shearing of trees and shrubs). We also run Hispanic outreach pruning classes, annually host the Urban Forest Symposiums, and administer the Seattle Heritage Tree Program. A branch of PlantAmnesty has ventured into the realm of politics with the creation of The Tree Canopy Coalition of emailers (T2C2) to send messages to the City Council and Mayor. And a splinter group has founded a local political action committee, TreePAC, to pressure candidates directly. Soon this question will be answered: Can organized political action succeed where research and education have failed to create sufficient budgets, laws, and enforcement in order to ensure a healthy Urban Forest?