

Shear Madness

By Cass Turnbull

It was 25 years ago that I set out to end bad pruning in King County. The first thing I did was write some articles explaining what was wrong. I am still surprised that the “Bulletin” saw fit to publish them. The titles were: Birch Butchery, Cherry Stripping, and Poodleballing: Sport of Kings. At the same time, I started a non-profit organization, PlantAmnesty, to promote better pruning. Our stated mission was to “end the senseless torture and mutilation of trees and shrubs caused by mal-pruning”.

We have succeeded, by and large, in ending tree topping in Seattle—a task that seemed impossible when we started. To measure our progress, we analyzed the Yellow Pages ads under “Tree Services.” In 1999, 60 percent of the display ads listed topping as a service. In the real world the incidence of topping was more like 90 percent of all the work done on trees. In 2005, only 20 percent listed topping. In 2010, topping had dropped to zero! I would estimate that about 10 percent of the work done continues to be topping—not by tree service companies, but by landscapers and overzealous homeowners with ladders. It’s pretty much a rite of spring. We can never let up educating people to stop topping their trees.

Unfortunately, the campaign to end inappropriate shrub shearing has gone nowhere. It is worse today than it was 25 years ago. Shrub shearing remains ubiquitous in Seattle, and around the world. I figure I have about 10 more good years in me, and I hope to convince the PlantAmnesty Board to pull out the stops and go for it. We need to prove it can be done! The crusade to end shearing, called the “Shear Madness Campaign”, is work that will have to be done in addition to our regular duties – giving pruning classes, running the referral service of good gardeners and arborists, facilitation Adopt-A-Plant (in which people “adopt” others’ unwanted shrubs), running the Seattle Heritage Tree Program (in which we locate, evaluate and designate the special trees of Seattle), and the many other activities that keep us funded and fulfill our mission. How can we possibly succeed?

With tree topping, our first step was to reach out to the natural constituency - the gardeners, garden clubs and garden writers who like plants—and heighten their awareness of the problem. I must have given the ‘Slideshow of Pruning Horrors’ to hundreds of garden clubs. We alerted the public through our humorous and informative “Hall of Shame” booth (which features photo-posters showing the consequences of bad pruning) at the Northwest Flower and Garden Show. The local arborists, who knew good pruning, supported us in word, deed and funding. The State gave us funding for public service announcements on TV, for brochures and for DVDs. And the media (TV, radio and newspapers) came to us, intrigued by our name and mission. Their coverage worked to reach hundreds of

PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

thousands of people with the good pruning word, and it did so for absolutely free. We wrote letters to weather forecasters, media horticulturists and reporters, who recommended topping at the time. When we started our crusade, tree topping was synonymous with tree pruning. Slowly we changed public perception of topping so that it was no longer regarded as an acceptable practice.

Tree topping is bad and wrong and it shouldn't be done because it is bad for health and safety of trees, and it's hard on the pocketbook. It just doesn't work in the long run to make the tree safer or shorter. The opposite, in fact, is true. Shrub shearing is also bad, and it's wrong, and it shouldn't be done because it is bad for the health of shrubs. It causes water sprout regrowth, which looks awful and gets exponentially worse every time a shrub is pruned, therefore costing more money. The ill-effects of shearing are delayed, but it will and does kill plants. Long before they die, they will become unwieldy balls of crowded branches, deadwood and dead leaves, with a nuisance of water sprouts that demand constant attention. A well-planned landscape is practically immortal, as long as it is weeded and watered. I have watched with sadness as many fine landscapes have been sheared to death over the course of a decade or more. And how annoying it must be for the designers to see their carefully selected and placed plants ruined by overzealous, uninformed, well-meaning workers. Shrub shearing should be disallowed on the basis of waste alone: It is a waste of time, money and plant material. Hundreds of thousands of plants are being ruined, everywhere, all the time.

But there is a problem. Whereas tree topping looks horrible to the average person, sheared shrubs are attractive to the untrained eye. I remember when I worked on the grounds crew of the Seattle Parks Department. I was riding up Queen Anne Hill in a green truck with my boss when we drove past one of those goofy-sheared yards. My boss said in disgust, "Sheared to within an inch of their lives!" I thought to myself, "He sure is a party pooper. I think they look cool, and their health seems fine to me." Now it's 30 years later, and I'm married to that guy and running a non-profit to end shrub shearing. These days I think of the love of sheared shrubbery as an early awareness and appreciation of plants. It is a stage that should be passed through quickly on the journey of garden appreciation. Sort of like when I was a little girl and liked pink unicorns. One needs to mature and develop a more sophisticated appreciation of what plants do.

The problem is not only that shearing looks good, it is also that there are times and places where shearing is the right sort of pruning to do: formal hedges, real topiary and tamamono (the sheared lower-story plants in authentic Japanese gardens). But in these cases, as with all forms of pruning art, the species is chosen specifically for this purpose. Training starts young and is guaranteed for the life of the plant, which is designed and installed for just such a purpose. You don't just go one day and turn your forsythia into a duck.

PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

Everything that is sheared is not topiary. Species criteria for good topiary are plants that have small leaves, spaced close together, that are tough enough to take it, that break bud on bare wood and hopefully don't do anything else very interesting (like flower).

Because some people like how it looks and because there are instances where shearing is the correct thing to do, there is a widespread misperception that it is just an alternate kind of pruning. Really, just a personal preference. And we are being plant snobs to try to take away these people's sources of amusement? After all, what gives us the right to impose our own aesthetic on others? What about those laborers working as unskilled gardeners? What are they going to do for a living?

To that I say, it isn't an alternate kind of pruning. Or maybe it is, but only insofar as it is the wrong kind of alternate pruning. A leading arborist from the Western Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture recently said to me that the common practice of tree topping in Italy is 'a tree management system'. Well, I guess so, but it is the wrong tree management system. A friend who visited the South heard a tour guide refer to slavery as an economic system. I guess that's true too. But to complete the sentence, it is an untenable economic system. If there were just a few crazy over-sheared yards out there, I guess we'd just call it folk art and move on. But shearing is everywhere. I mean everywhere! I went out to take a photo of a selectively pruned commercial site, and after driving around for two hours, I couldn't find one. There is just block after block of sheared landscapes. It's really depressing. We've got to do something. But first off, the natural constituency of plants - that's the Arboretum Foundation, all garden clubs, Master Gardeners media horticulturists - need to fully understand in their hearts and minds that shearing isn't an optional kind of pruning. It's just plain wrong. Wrong and bad, and it shouldn't be done. You are not being a meanie to tell the condo manager, or the golf club manager, or the Parks Department that they need to require all non-hedge plants to be selectively pruned. You are just being responsible.

But what about Olga who lives next door and proudly shears her forsythia every year. We don't want to hurt her feelings, do we? I've been doing this a long time, and what I have found is that people who already shear don't get upset. When they run across our literature, see the slideshow or pass by the booth, there seems to be some sort of protective mechanism in place. They either 1) dismiss PlantAmnesty as just a bunch of overbearing kooks or 2) concluded that their yard is actually topiary, and a damn fine specimen at that. And that's fine with us.

PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲



- A. *Junipers Shared Down into their dead zones will never resprout.*
- B. *Not everything that is sheared is topiary.*
- C. *An abelia responds to shearing with waterspouts*
- D. *The natural branch structure of the Japanese maple is now ruined.*

PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

We simply want to educate those who are yet uncommitted to request selective pruning and reject shearing. Landscape companies who shear sometimes welcome the chance to get out of the rut. Some company owners, however, can get pretty upset when you tell them what they have been doing is wrong. There is an old saying, “the truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off”. They will get over it. Sometimes the bosses understand selective pruning but have a hard time controlling the shearing maniac found on all ground crews everywhere. This person needs to be stopped. And as for those poor unskilled laborers, there is no reason they can’t learn selective pruning too. Then they can become skilled labor and charge more for their services. This is why it is so critical for PlantAmnesty to continue and expand our education outreach program.

The “Shear Madness Campaign” is going to be a lot harder to run than the “Anti-Topping Crusade.” As stated above, the main reason is that shearing is perceived as a style or philosophy of pruning, not as something that doesn’t work. It will also be practically impossible to grant funding. And since the gardening movement collapsed and newspapers ceased to be the main source of information, our media outreach is more difficult too. Up until now, it has been the easiest, fastest, cheapest way to change the body of public knowledge. I am an analogue woman in a digital world and cannot fathom how Facebook and Twitter can help change common knowledge. Perhaps help is out there. We won’t know until we try. And try we will. It will take perseverance, money, creativity and the ability to withstand being perceived as intolerant. Wish us luck!