

What Is Topping?

The sight of topped trees is all too common in the communities and along the roadways of America—trunks with stubby limbs standing naked in the landscape, trees stripped of all dignity and grace. To one who loves trees, the sight usually evokes anger and disgust.

As more is learned about the long-term effects of tree topping, the more senseless this practice becomes. It is more than an assault on beauty, it is unnecessary stress and increased risk to the tree's health. It is also a self-defeating exercise usually not worth the expense, and the results pose a danger from rot and weakly attached re-growth. In short, as one arborist said, "Topping is the absolute worst thing you can do for the health of your tree."

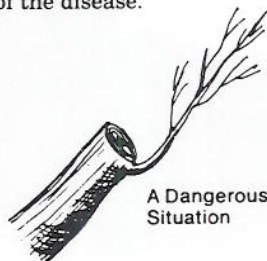
Trees are often topped because they grow into utility wires, interfere with views or solar collectors, or simply grow so large that they worry the landowner. Some people—having seen trees topped in a park or other public place under the care of an "expert"—top their trees because of a mistaken impression that the practice is good for trees, especially because of the obvious flush of new growth that follows. Topping is also a result of irreputable "tree experts" knocking on doors and convincing the homeowner that for safety reasons, the job should be done. Their services are then offered—quick 'n cheap.

David Rank, University of Idaho



Why NOT To "Top" — Eight Good Reasons

- 1 Starvation:** Good pruning practices rarely remove more than $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ 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 a new 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 just 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 more dense and dangerous crown.
- 6 Tree Death:** Some species of trees are less tolerant to topping than others. Beeches, for example, do not sprout readily after severe pruning and the reduced foliage most surely will lead to 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 needed for good pruning. Therefore, topping 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.



Don't Top Trees!

Cutting branches back to ugly stubs is one of the worst things you can do for your tree's health.

Topping removes so much of the tree's leafy crown that it dangerously reduces the tree's food-making ability.

The exposed ends of topped limbs are highly vulnerable to insects or decay fungi.



Topping destroys a tree's beauty and seriously reduces its ability to survive.

Tree care professionals say that topping – cutting main branches back to stubs – is the worst thing you can do for the health of a tree.

Your trees will lose their natural appearance, and the ugly, weakly-attached new limbs often grow back higher than the original branches. And these new limbs are more likely to be hazardous to people and property nearby.

For a free copy of Tree City USA Bulletin #8, *Don't Top Trees!*, write The National Arbor Day Foundation, 100 Arbor Ave., Nebraska City, NE 68410.

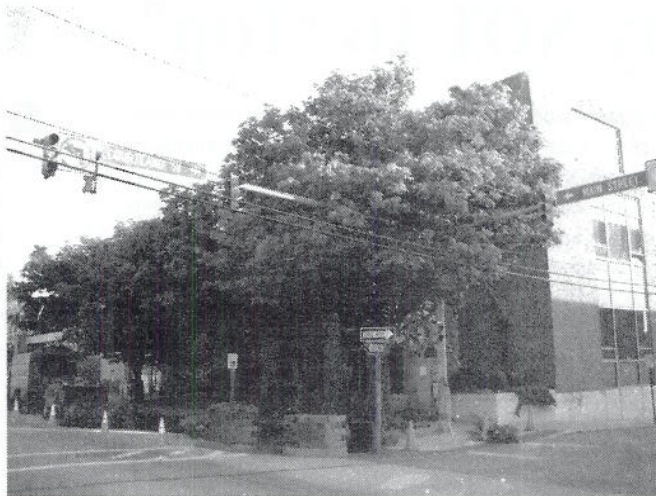


**The National
Arbor Day Foundation***
www.arborday.org

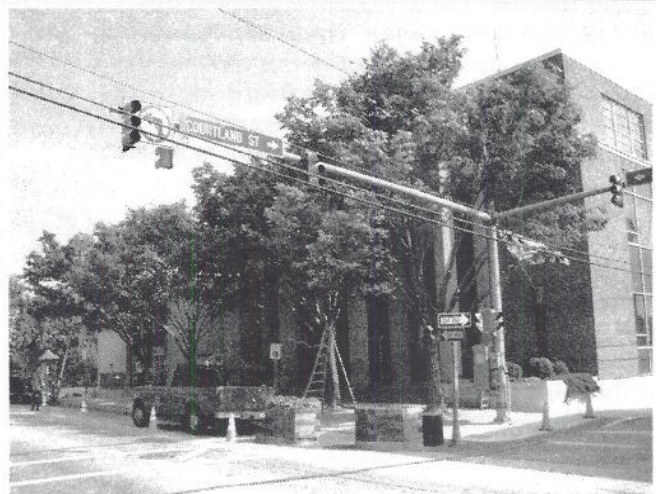
Proper Trimming Techniques

Take a look at these photos:

This first photograph shows the Zelkova trees in front of the Sheriff's Department building prior to trimming. Note the size and shape of the trees and the density of the foliage.



Here are the same trees after proper trimming. Note that the height and shape of the trees hasn't changed. These trees have been thinned properly.



Photos by Bob Syphard