

Tree Topping: What It Is, Why It's Bad and How To Prevent It

What is it?

Tree topping is expensive, mutilating and obsolete. Yet it still occurs widely throughout the Midwest.

Why is it bad?

Myth and lack of public understanding about proper tree care are two major reasons why people pay to have their trees destroyed each year.

What is Tree Topping?

Tree topping is the drastic removal, or cutting back, of large branches in mature trees, leaving large, open wounds which subject the tree to disease and decay. Topping causes immediate injury to the tree and ultimately results in early failure or death of the tree.

Other names for this malpractice include stubbing, heading, heading-back, stubbing-off, tipping, hatracking, topping off, dehorning, lopping, or roundover.

In short, topping - by any name - is the worst thing to do to the health of a tree.

Tree Topping vs. Tree Pruning: No Contest

Tree topping should never be confused with proper pruning. A topped tree is easy to spot - the tree's natural shape has been destroyed, while a properly pruned tree often looks as if no work has been done at all. With proper pruning, an arborist will spend time carefully selecting and removing branches. Careful selective pruning retains the tree's natural shape and beauty.

Proper pruning is an important part of caring for - and protecting - the health of your trees. In fact, many tree care professionals recommend that homeowners start early and continue proper pruning throughout the life of a tree.



People top trees for many reasons, all of them connected to falsehoods and misconceptions.

Myth: Topping a tree will reduce storm damage and make the tree easier to maintain.

Truth: Topped trees can regain their original height in as fast as 2 years. The fast growing, extremely long and loosely attached shoots caused by topping may be more susceptible to breakage and storm damage. Ultimately, a topped tree requires more attention in the future than a properly pruned tree.

Myth: Topping invigorates a tree.

Truth: Topping immediately injures a tree and starts it on a downward spiral. Topping wounds expose a tree to decay and invasion from insects and disease. Also, the loss of foliage starves the tree, which weakens the roots, reducing the tree's structural strength. While a tree may survive topping, its life span will be significantly reduced.

Myth: Topped trees will add value to your property.

Truth: Topped trees lack natural beauty and may reduce your property values. Also, a topped tree can become hazardous and cause property damage, making it a liability

How to Prevent It

As a homeowner, you must educate yourself and make wise choices to protect your home and property - including your trees. A tree is a valuable asset. As a long-term investment, trees require careful decisions and the occasional advice and service of a professional. Here's what you can do to protect your trees:

Hire only competent, insured and certified tree care professionals.

When seeking a tree service, check the company's topping policy. If they say top, don't let them near your trees.

Find out if the individual or company carries professional certification, particularly through the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA). The ISA conducts extensive course and certifies those that pass an industry-based exam.

Most importantly, never let yourself be pressured by bargains. The old saying, "you get what you pay for" truly applies here.

An Ounce of Prevention: Right Tree, Right Place

Every species of tree has different height, width and spacing needs in order to grown into a healthy mature tree. Carefully matching your tree selection with site conditions - proximity to other trees, buildings or above ground utilities - can prevent problems before they occur and will eliminate the need to take harmful, drastic measures. Many utility companies and forestry agencies provide guidelines for planting trees and recommendations of tree species to fit your needs. Trees are a long-term investment.

You have the ability - and the responsibility - to prevent future problems by applying the practice of "the right tree in the right place."

Information Resources

For more information about caring for your trees, and brochures that explain in greater detail about proper tree pruning and tree selection, contact the organizations below.

[Arbor Day Foundation](#) can provide information about tree planting and proper pruning:

100 Arbor Avenue Nebraska City, NE 68410 (402) 474-5655

[International Society of Arboriculture \(ISA\)](#) can provide information about professional certification and standards: Email: isa@isa-arbor.com