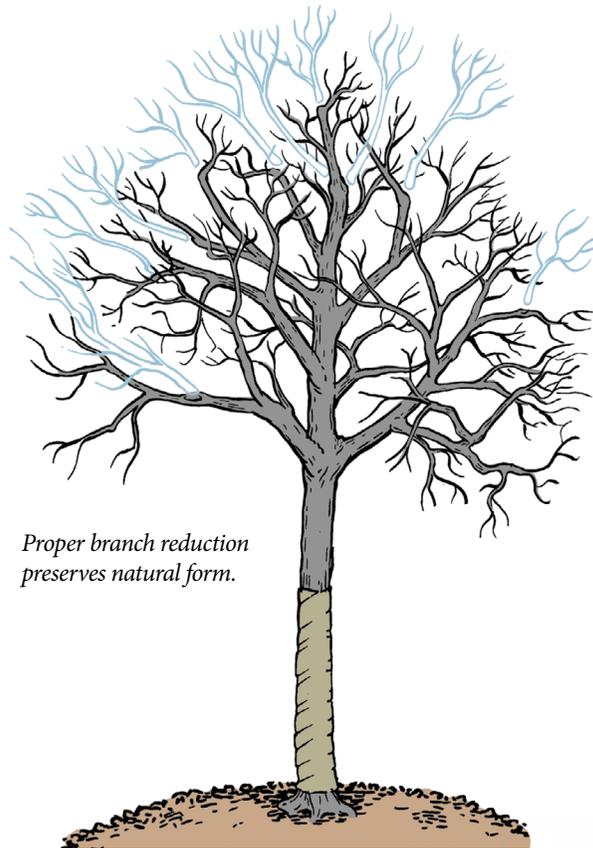
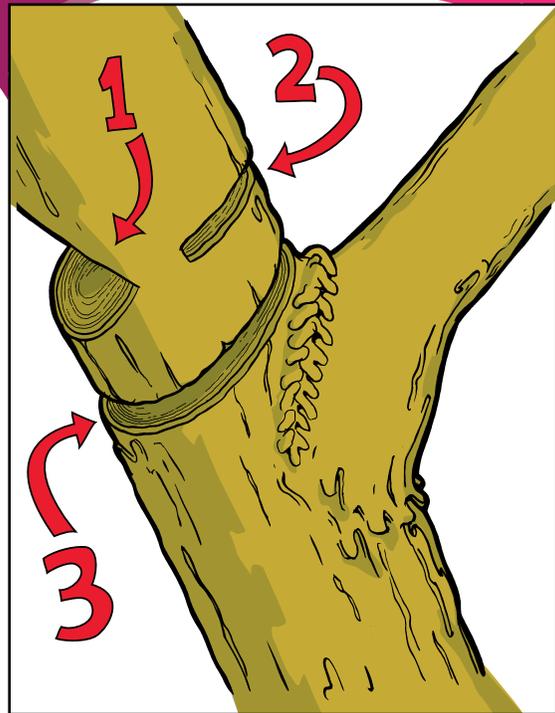


Why Topping Hurts Trees



Proper branch reduction preserves natural form.

Alternatives to Topping

Sometimes a tree must be reduced in height or spread, such as for providing utility line clearance. There are recommended techniques for doing so. Small branches should be removed back to their point of origin. If a larger limb must be shortened, it should be pruned back to a lateral branch that is large enough (at least one-third the diameter of the limb being removed) to assume the terminal role. This method of branch reduction helps to preserve the natural form of the tree. However, if large

cuts are involved, the tree may not be able to close over and compartmentalize the wounds. Sometimes the best solution is to remove the tree and replace it with a species that is more appropriate for the site.

This brochure is one in a series published by the International Society of Arboriculture as part of its Consumer Information Program. You may have additional interest in the following titles currently in the series:

- Avoiding Tree and Utility Conflicts
- Avoiding Tree Damage During Construction
- Benefits of Trees
- Buying High-Quality Trees
- Insect and Disease Problems
- Mature Tree Care
- New Tree Planting
- Plant Health Care
- Proper Mulching Techniques
- Palms
- Pruning Mature Trees
- Pruning Young Trees
- Recognizing Tree Risk
- Treatment of Trees Damaged by Construction
- Tree Selection and Placement
- Trees and Turf
- Tree Values
- Why Hire an Arborist
- Why Topping Hurts Trees

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Through research, technology, and education, the International Society of Arboriculture promotes the professional practice of arboriculture and fosters a greater worldwide awareness of the benefits of trees. For further information, contact: ISA, P.O. Box 3129, Champaign, IL 61826-3129, U.S.



Learn why topping is not an acceptable pruning technique and discover recommended alternatives.



Topping is perhaps the most harmful tree pruning practice known. Yet, despite more than 25 years of literature and seminars explaining its harmful effects, topping remains a common practice.



What is Topping?

Topping is the indiscriminate cutting of tree branches to stubs or to lateral branches that are not large enough to assume the terminal role. Other names for topping include “heading,” “tipping,” “hat-racking,” and “rounding over.”

Topping is often used to reduce the size of a tree. A homeowner may feel that a tree has become too large for his or her property, or that tall

Topping is cutting branches back to stubs or lateral branches not large enough to sustain the remaining branch.



trees may pose an unacceptable risk. Topping, however, is not a viable method of height reduction and certainly does not reduce future risk. In fact, topping will increase risk in the long term.

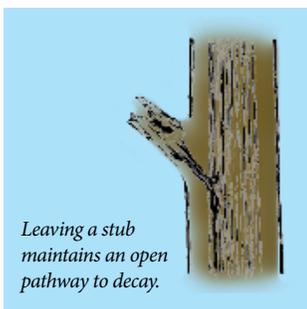
Topping Stresses Trees

Topping can remove 50 to 100 percent of a tree’s leaf-bearing crown. Leaves are the food factories of a tree. Removing them can temporarily starve a tree and trigger various survival mechanisms. Dormant buds are activated, forcing the rapid growth of multiple shoots below each cut. The tree needs to put out a new crop of leaves as soon as possible. If a tree does not have the stored energy reserves to do so, it will be seriously weakened and may die.

A stressed tree with large, open pruning wounds is more vulnerable to insect and disease infestations. The tree may lack sufficient energy to chemically defend the wounds against invasion, and some insects are actually attracted to the chemical signals trees release.

Topping Leads to Decay

Correct pruning cuts are made just beyond the branch collar at the point of attachment. The tree is biologically equipped to close such a wound, provided the tree is healthy enough and the wound is not too large. Cuts made indiscriminately between lateral branches create stubs or wounds that the tree may not be able to close. The exposed wood



Leaving a stub maintains an open pathway to decay.

tissues begin to decay. Normally, a tree will “wall off,” or compartmentalize, the decaying tissues, but few trees can defend the multiple severe wounds caused by topping. The decay organisms are given a free path to move down through the branches.

Topping Can Lead to Sunburn

Branches in the tree’s crown produce thousands of leaves to absorb sunlight. When the leaves are removed, the remaining branches and trunk are suddenly exposed to high levels of light and heat. The result may be sunburn of the tissues beneath the bark, which can lead to cankers, bark splitting, and death of some branches.

Topping Can Lead to Unacceptable Risk

The survival mechanism that causes a tree to produce multiple shoots below each topping cut comes at great expense to the tree. These shoots develop from buds near the surface of the old branches. Unlike normal branches that develop in a socket of overlapping wood tissues, these new shoots are anchored only in the outermost layers of the parent branches and are weakly attached.

The new shoots grow quickly, as much as 20 feet (6 m) in one year in some species. Unfortunately, the shoots are prone to breaking, especially during windy or icy conditions. While the original goal was to reduce risk by reducing height, risk of limb failure has now increased.



New shoots develop profusely below a topping cut.

Topping Makes Trees Ugly

The natural branching structure of a tree is a biological wonder. Trees form a variety of shapes and growth habits, all with the same goal of presenting their leaves to the sun. Topping removes the ends of the branches, often leaving ugly stubs. Topping destroys the natural form of a tree. Without leaves (for up to 6 months of the year in temperate climates), a topped tree appears disfigured and mutilated. With leaves, it is a dense ball of foliage, lacking its simple grace. A tree that has been topped can never fully regain its natural form.

Topping Is Expensive

The cost of topping a tree is not limited to only the job cost. Some hidden costs of topping include:

- Increased maintenance costs. If the tree survives, it will likely require corrective pruning within a few years (e.g., crown reduction or storm damage repair). If the tree dies, it will have to be removed.
- Reduced property value. Healthy, well-maintained trees can add 10 to 20 percent to the value of a property. Disfigured, topped trees are considered an impending expense.
- Increased liability potential. Topped trees may pose an unacceptable level of risk. Because topping is considered an unacceptable pruning practice, any damage caused by branch failure of a topped tree may lead to a finding of negligence in a court of law.