

DO NOT TOP TREES



Topping trees is an incorrect and damaging practice, regardless of the reasons behind it. Research and practice confirm this and are easily found online.

Despite what you may see, particularly on streets and commercial properties, topping is not proper tree maintenance.

When a tree is considered to be too tall, for whatever reason, a cheap topping job is a quick fix, if a temporary one. Even though it's not the intent to harm the tree, you are.

Let's break down what tree topping means, why people do it, and why you should **not** top trees.

WHAT IS TOPPING?

Tree topping is exactly what it sounds like: removing the top of the tree. This reduces the tree's remaining top branches to little more than stubs. As a result, the tree is left with a bare, unnatural appearance, and undergoes stress as the tree puts out new branches and leaves in order to survive.

WHY DO PEOPLE TOP TREES?

The main reasons trees are topped:

- Reduce interference with electrical wires.
- Shorten trees thought to be growing too tall
- Concern that a tall tree is more likely to fall in a storm

While topping may seem a reasonable action to address these concerns, tree topping is NOT the way to do it. In the long-run, topping a tree can prove to be a costly mistake. The tree's health and structural stability will be affected, reducing the value and longevity of the tree, as well as increasing the risk of failure.

RELATED RESOURCES

[Why Topping Hurts Trees](#)

[What's Wrong with Topping Trees?](#)

[Don't Top Trees NC mini-poster](#)



COMMON MYTHS ABOUT TREE TOPPING

1. *Topping reduces storm damage by reducing the tree height and branch length.*

WRONG – Topped trees respond to the loss of foliage by pushing out new branches and leaves, often regaining and even exceeding their original height. However, these weakly attached branches (and the decay which can occur at the cut) are more likely to break in a storm. Therefore, a topped tree increases the risk for storm damage and the related clean-up costs.

2. *Topping works for trees the same way it works for shrubs, revitalizing the tree.*

WRONG – The flush of new growth is not invigorating; it is actually a survival response that exhausts the tree's energy reserves. Topping is a physical injury that damages and stresses a tree, makes it more susceptible to pests and disease, and opens it up to internal decay. The loss of leaves starves the tree, since both the crown and the roots suffer, further damaging the tree. A tree can survive topping, but its life will be shorter.

3. *Topping increases property value.*

WRONG – Topped trees have lost their natural form and beauty. In addition, the increased risk of failure from decay and weakly attached branches increase maintenance costs as well as potential liability.

4. *Topping is so common that it must be the right thing to do.*

WRONG – Just because a poor practice is observed repeatedly does not mean it is appropriate tree care. Research has proven, and practice has confirmed, that topped trees are ugly, more costly and pose greater risks than properly pruned trees. No reputable professional tree care company would ever advise or admit to tree topping.



ALTERNATIVES TO TREE TOPPING

The best way to manage tree growth and maintain tree health is to consult a Certified Arborist. These tree care professionals know how to correctly and safely prune trees, and they can explain how to best maintain and care for them.

- Reduction pruning is an effective alternative to topping. Carefully placed cuts reduce branch length, minimize wound size and reduce sprouting.
- Correct pruning when a tree is young can help reduce some of the structural issues that develop as a tree matures. "Training pruning" combines carefully placed cuts with an understanding of how a tree grows.
- LOOK UP! Plant future trees in a suitable growing space for their mature size. Make sure you're not planting where the tree height or crown spread could conflict with structures or utilities. If you are, find a new spot.