# Topping Trees
# FACT SHEET

GREEN DROP Tree Care

## What is Topping?:

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

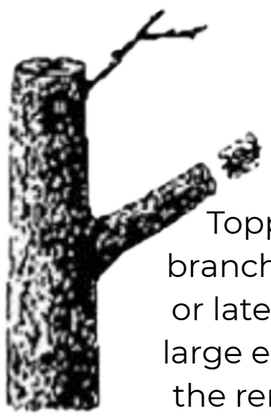
The most common reason given for topping is to reduce the size of a tree. Often homeowners feel that their trees have become too large for their property. People fear that tall trees may pose a hazard.

Topping, however, is not a viable method of height reduction and certainly does not reduce the hazard. In fact, topping will make a tree more hazardous in the long term.

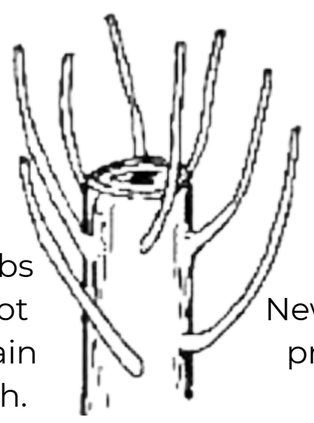
## Why Topping Hurts Trees:

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.

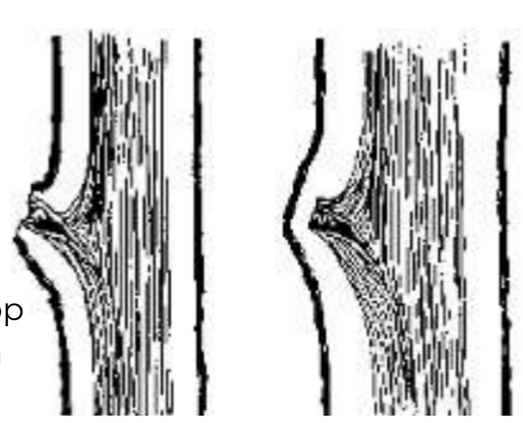
Topping is not an acceptable pruning technique.



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



New shoots develop profusely below a topping cut.



The tree will close a well-positioned cut as new wood is produced. Normally it will compartmentalize any internal decay.

## Topping Stresses Trees:

Topping often removes 50-100% of the leaf-bearing crown of a tree. Since the leaves are the food factories of a tree, this can temporarily starve a tree. The severity of the pruning triggers a sort of survival mechanism. The tree activates latent buds 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 this, it will be seriously weakened and may die.

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

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## Topping Causes Decay:

The preferred location to make a pruning cut is just beyond the branch collar at the branch's 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 along a limb between lateral branches create stubs with wounds that the tree may not be able to close. The exposed wood 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.



Leaving a stub maintains an open pathway to decay.

## Topping Can Lead to Sunburn:

Branches within a 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. This can lead to cankers, bark splitting, and death of some branches.

## Topping Creates Hazards:

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.

The new shoots grow very quickly, as much as 20 feet in one year, in some species. Unfortunately, the shoots are very prone to breaking, especially during windy conditions. The irony is that while the goal was to reduce the tree's height to make it safer, it has been made more hazardous than before.



If the height of a tree must be reduced, all cuts should be made to strong laterals or to the parent limb. Do not cut limbs back to stubs. Trees that have been topped may become hazardous and are unsightly.



Stubs left from topping usually decay. The shoots that are produced below the cut are weakly attached and often become a hazard.

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## 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 the leaves (up to 6 months of the year in temperate climates) a topped tree appears disfigured and mutilated. With the 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 what the perpetrator is paid. If the tree survives, it will require pruning again within a few years. It will either need to be reduced again or storm damage will have to be cleaned up. If the tree dies, it will have to be removed.

Topping is a high maintenance pruning practice, and there are some hidden costs of topping. One is the reduction in property value. Healthy, well maintained trees can add 10-20% to the value of a property. Disfigured, topped trees are considered an impending expense.

Another potential cost of topped trees is the potential liability. Topped trees are prone to breaking and can be hazardous. Since topping is considered to be 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.

## Alternatives to Topping:

There are times when a tree must be reduced in height or spread. Providing clearance for utility lines is an example. There are recommended techniques for doing this. If practical, branches should be removed back to their point of origin. If a branch must be shortened, it should be cut back to a lateral that is large enough to assume the terminal role. A rule of thumb for this is to cut back to a lateral that is at least 1/3 the diameter of the limb being removed.

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.

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## Contact:

Tree Care

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