



My Tree Is Too Big!

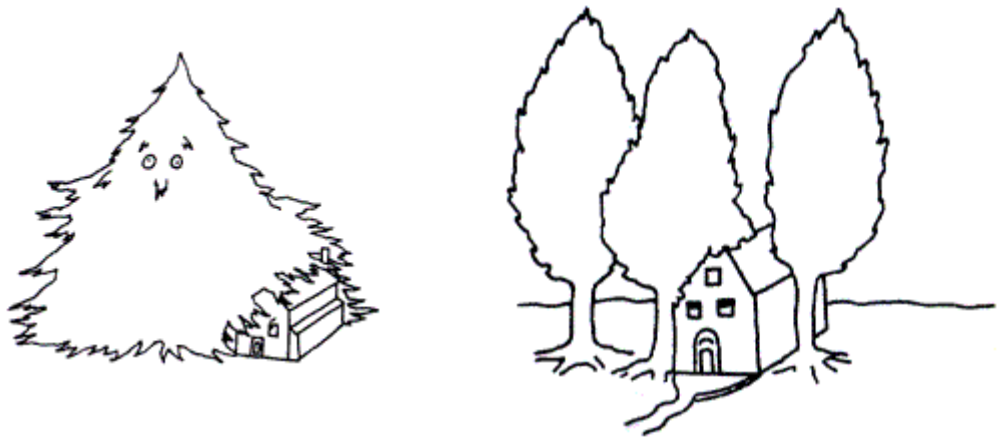
by Cass Turnbull



Since tree topping is not an acceptable alternative for dealing with trees, homeowners --- and, more importantly, communities --- need to understand and consider the alternatives. Topping creates unsightly and sometimes hazardous rotten trees. It stimulates rapid, messy regrowth which can become a maintenance nightmare. Topping doesn't work to keep trees small. It only works to turn property assets into legal, financial aesthetic liabilities. If your tree is too big, consider the following alternatives.

1. REMOVE/REPLACE

If your tree is truly in the way, remove it and use a stump grinder or treat the stump to keep it from re-growing. A tree in the wrong place is a weed. We kill cabbages and cattle for food, trees for lumber, and dandelions because they are in the "wrong" place. Trees are no different. It's better for your property value and kinder to the tree to remove it than to try to keep it in an unnaturally short form.



You may care to plant a tree which is genetically programmed to be "small" now, and plan to cut down that big tree later. City Arborists, power companies, and nurseries can help you select the best "small" tree for your area. Examples of small trees (30 feet and under) are crabapples, snowdrop (Styrax j.), Japanese maple and some types of magnolias and dogwoods.

2. PRUNE THE TREE

Although the goal of proper pruning is never to reduce the height of an ornamental (means not a fruit tree) tree, a good arborist (tree pruner) can prune in such a way that many problems seem to magically disappear. Good selective pruning will reduce the bulk of a tree, letting in more light and allowing wind to pass through the tree. Reducing wind resistance by "taking out the sail" will make your tree safer. Also, good pruning does not stimulate regrowth and will "stay done" longer than topping or over-thinning.

Arborists often remove lower limbs which directly interfere with the roof, foot traffic, or vehicle traffic. This is called limbing-up, or skirting. Selective pruning channels growth in more advantageous directions. It does not try to stop growth. Selective pruning according to International Society of Arboriculture standards (ISA) or National Arborist Association (NAA) standards will make your tree seem less oppressive, cleaner, more distinct and more beautiful.

A good arborist not only knows what kind of cuts to make (thinning cuts, not heading or topping cuts); he or she also knows when to quit. Trees vary as to the degree of thinning they can take. A pine tree can be thinned out and layered dramatically; a cherry tree won't take much. If you prune too heavily, the tree either succumbs to death in a drought or it suckers back like crazy the next year. Take care in selecting an arborist to find one who will do what he can to please the customer without damaging the tree.



3. BE AN ARBORPHILIAS (LOVER OF TREES) --- NOT AN ARBOPHOBIC (FEARFUL OF BIG TREES).

Many people have a tree topped or removed because they are afraid it is "too big" and will fall over. Trees do sometimes fall over or drop limbs, but never because they are "too big." If you have safety concerns, have a qualified arborist do a hazard tree evaluation.

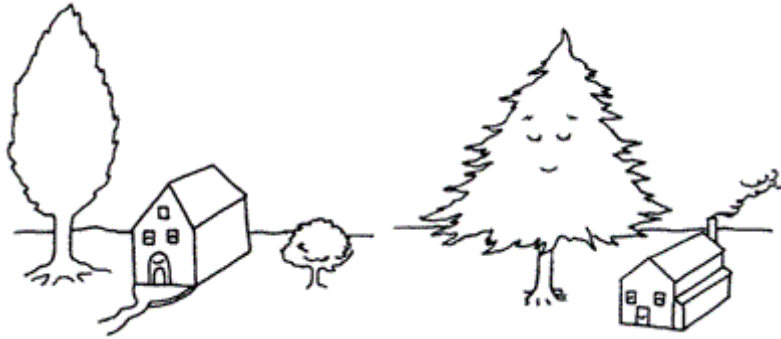
Signs of potentially hazardous trees include mushrooms or white sheeting on the trunks; cracks; earlier topping cuts; excessive dead wood; heavy cone set; large hollows; and cut or disturbed root systems. If your tree truly is hazardous, it should be removed.

Most people rely on their feelings to tell them if their tree is too big. *This is not an accurate or objective measure of safety.* Find out the type of species of your tree and how big you can expect it to get. You might find out that the one you have is just an adolescent. Or perhaps it has "maxed out" and you have the biggest and best in the neighborhood.

Tree lovers measure the greatness of a tree by its size and age, as well as its species. The bigger and older the tree, the better. Trees are big by their very nature; they are, in fact, "the most massive, tallest, longest-lived organisms on the planet. It's what they do.



In addition to enhancing your property value, trees clean the air of particulate pollution; cool and freshen the air; make oxygen out of nasty old CO and CO₂, contribute shade; break strong winds; break heavy rain downpours; serve as habitat for songbirds that control insect populations *and* remind you that spring is here; serve as habitat for kids; and add beauty and grandeur to the community. Not a bad deal for the price of a little leaf raking. Appreciating your tree may make its size a source of pride, not concern.



QUESTIONS?

For further information on correct pruning of trees, contact a certified arborist, PlantAmnesty or either of the following organizations. The NAA has pruning standards which may be used when soliciting bids from tree-care and landscaping companies. Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

International Society of Arboriculture (ISA)
P.O. Box 71
Urbana, IL 61801
(217) 328-2032

National Arborist Association (NAA)
P.O. Box 1094
Amherst, NH 03031-1094
(603) 673-3311