

The Myth of Tree Topping

*By Linda Chalker-Scott, Associate Professor
Center for Urban Horticulture, University of Washington*

"It's like a haircut - sometimes it's necessary and a tree can always grow out of a bad one."

The Myth

In the three years I've written this column I've never addressed the issue of tree topping. Since plant scientists and arborists unanimously agree that tree topping is an unjustifiable tree management practice, I assumed that the word had trickled down to practitioners and their customers. Yet this summer, like every year before, brought a new crop of buzz-cut trees. It also brought a new crop of excuses (culled from the internet):

- "I want to trim the top branches off a 75' tall maple because it's causing excess shade in my yard. I want the tree to live, but just be smaller."
- "I wouldn't make the sweeping generalization that all tree topping is bad. Locals here whack their weeping willows every few years and those trees seem to relish the opportunity to fill out again."
- "It is necessary for the electric company to top trees that grow into the power lines."
- "The trees look like hell for a while but seem to get used to the treatment."

A tree service company states "Although topping a tree is not usually recommended, it is sometimes very necessary. Some of the time it can be a definite safety issue. Other times a tree is topped to get rid of mistletoe." There's another web page entitled "Trees that love chainsaws" (!), and in a questionable marketing move, a UK company has trademarked the name "tree-topping" to describe its approach to forest management: after thinning, the remaining trees are topped to "reduce wind throw."

The Reality

I'll preface this discussion with a caution that I am only referring to pruning trees not shrubs or hedges), and only to trees that are being maintained in their natural form. There are many types of formal pruning techniques including pollarding, pleaching, espaliering, etc. but they are not included in this discussion.

A reduction cut (also called drop-crotching or thinning to a lateral) is a method of pruning used to reduce the height of a tree. When done properly, branches are cut back to a lateral branch at least one-third the diameter of the limb being removed and large enough to outgrow lateral branches directly below. The lateral branch becomes the source of new terminal growth and subsequently the tree maintains a natural form. This is an appropriate pruning technique for decurrent or rounded trees but should never be used on excurrent or pyramidal trees except to remove multiple leaders.

PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

Unfortunately, many tree cutters (certainly not certified arborists!) claim to thin to laterals when in reality they are topping the tree. Also known as hatracking, height reduction, canopy reduction, heading back or stubbing back, this type of pruning cut removes a terminal shoot back to a point where there is no appropriate lateral branch to take over the terminal role. In response, multiple shoots (or leaders) begin to compete for dominance, resulting in the infamous "hydra" look. What has now been created is a high-maintenance, potentially hazardous tree that must be constantly pruned. Pruning a tree yearly is certainly not environmentally sustainable or cost-effective - but does keep tree cutters in business!

There are plant health issues with tree topping: it's been demonstrated that sun damage, nutrient stress, insect attack, and decay result from unnecessary and incorrect pruning procedures. There are also aesthetic issues with tree topping: improperly pruned trees are ugly. For years, groups such as the International Society of Arboriculture and the Seattle-based PlantAmnesty have tried to educate professionals and homeowners about the horrors of tree topping, from both a plant health perspective and an aesthetic one; yet tree topping continues. Perhaps what's needed in today's tort-happy society is a liability perspective to make tree cutters and those that hire them sit up and take notice.

After topping, many epicormic shoots arise and develop into weakly attached branches. These branches, and the multiple leaders, continue to develop girth and weight and have an increasing potential to fall and cause damage to people and property. From a legal standpoint, the owner of such a tree is responsible for damages if it can be proved that the owner was negligent. If I were to tell my neighbor that her tree constituted a hazard and later this same tree fell and damaged my property, in some states I would be entitled to both actual and punitive damages. There is no doubt within the scientific and arborist communities that incorrect pruning can cause trees to become hazardous. Only one expert witness is needed to demonstrate this and the owner, or the landscape maintenance company, is found responsible.

If every property owner was given this last paragraph of information, I would bet that tree topping would come to a screeching halt. But as long as anyone with a pickup truck and a chainsaw is allowed to call himself a "landscape professional", property owners by and large will remain blissfully unaware. Property owners need to become educated: they need to insist on certified arborists for tree care and they need to make wise decisions before installing plant material that will outgrow its welcome.

The Bottom Line

- Tree topping is never a justifiable pruning practice; it increases tree health problems and is aesthetically unappealing

PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

- A topped tree will require constant maintenance and has an increased potential to become hazardous
- Hazardous trees are a liability and ultimately the property owner is responsible for any damage hazard trees cause
- Certified arborists and other legitimate landscape professionals do not practice tree topping
- There are acceptable pruning techniques designed to keep trees away from power lines and other structures
- If problems caused by a tree cannot be solved through acceptable management practices, the tree should be removed and replaced with plant material more appropriate for the site
- Think about the mature size of a tree and where it will grow relative to power lines and other structures before you plant it

* Of Myth and Men ©