



Centerville Tree Board Recommendations for

Do Not 'Top' Trees

Topping versus Pruning

Just Because Your
Neighbor Does It,
Doesn't Mean It Is
Okay.

"Topping" is a type of pruning that removes most, if not all of the small branches and limbs, leaving only large, stubby limbs. Topping is sometimes considered a fast and inexpensive method of reducing the overall height and shape of a tree. However, if all factors are taken into consideration, topping is not really a long-term, fast way of reducing the size of the tree at all. Trees will grow back to their original size, this time with an unsightly appearance. Topping can be a very expensive way to maintain the size of the tree because of the frequent, and continual cost of pruning to keep the tree under control.

Trees are often topped because they grow into utility wires, they interfere with someone's view, they make harvesting fruit a hard job, or the tree may simply grow so large it worries the homeowner. Many pruning alternatives are available, so topping a tree should never be the only solution. ***Although topping a tree is not usually recommended, it is sometimes necessary.***

Facts of Topping

1. Topping may starve the tree to death. Normal pruning guidelines recommend not removing more than one-third of the total tree in one year. If too many of the tree's leaves are removed all at once, the food making ability of the tree may be seriously damaged, causing the tree to die. Some tree varieties (sycamore, willow, poplar, apple) are more resilient than others and can tolerate the extreme pruning of topping. Other varieties (beech, ginkgo, oak) will sometimes die if they are topped.
2. The large stubs left by topping are vulnerable to insect and disease problems. The tree's natural defense system will not be able to do its job when large pruning cuts are left exposed. These stubs are especially vulnerable to fungus that can kill the branch, or make it rot internally.
3. The remaining branches may not have been accustomed to direct sun, so the bark may get sunburned, or die.
4. A topped tree is an ugly tree. Even if the tree is pruned correctly, after being topped, it may never regain its former grace and character.
5. Pruning does not stop or stunt growth. Pruning actually stimulates new growth. By pruning severely, you stimulate more new growth, usually in the form of water sprouts or suckers. Suckers are the fast growing branches that are usually very weak. Weak branches and crotches make the tree unsafe during wind storms, or with heavy snow loads.
6. Unless the tree is regularly pruned, for the rest of its life, the tree will be larger and bushier than it was before it was topped.
7. In the short term topping may seem to be an easier, and a less expensive, way to prune a tree, than to hire a professional tree pruner. However, in the long run, proper pruning is actually cheaper. Topped trees usually need to be pruned more frequently (in the future) than properly pruned trees. Topped trees are more insect and disease prone; increasing the cost of chemical treatments. Topped trees are more likely to cause damage to surrounding buildings and plants, than properly pruned trees.
8. Topped trees may actually decrease the property value of your home.
9. Potential liability. Topped trees are prone to breaking and can be hazardous. Any damage caused by branch failure from a 'topped tree' may lead to a finding of negligence in a court of law.

Alternatives to Topping

Side-Pruning This pruning technique is useful when a tree is planted too close to a house or too close to power lines. Careful pruning can direct the tree away from one side to the other side, without creating a lopsided or unsightly tree. By thinning the tree rather than just heading back the branches you can avoid a hedge-like canopy.

Under-Pruning This pruning technique can be used for trees planted too close to sidewalks, to allow pedestrians to walk under the tree. Additional crown thinning can help keep the tree looking natural. Be sure to maintain the tree's symmetry by removing the lower branches on all sides of the tree.

Through-Pruning This pruning technique sometimes creates a "dough-nut hole". This type of pruning allows large trees, that have been planted under telephone lines, to maintain some of their natural appearance. With proper limb selection, the tree can be opened without creating an unsightly tunnel appearance.

Drop-Crotch Pruning Through the use of drop-crotch pruning, tree size and shape can be reduced without weakening the tree or creating an eyesore. When done correctly, drop-crotch pruning is virtually unnoticeable.

Drop-crotching is a pruning method that combines thinning out the crown of the tree and reducing its height and spread at the same time. Remove several inside branches right at the tree trunk. Do not just lop off large perimeter branches. Prune the large perimeter branches at their junction with the shorter, but still large diameter, side branches. Do not remove the large branches next to small branches or suckers may begin to take over. If a strong leader remains dominant, the tendency for the tree to produce suckers is greatly reduced.

Try not to remove more than twenty to thirty percent of the total tree in one year.

Less is best, but in severe cases, prune your tree heavily for two or three years in a row, to reduce the overall height and spread, and then do not prune as much in the following years. When pruning severely, be sure to monitor your tree during the summer, to remove potential suckering problems.

With care, drop crotch pruning will produce a smaller, more desirable tree, while still maintaining its natural shape and appearance.