

## NO TREE TOPPING



Topped trees are very common sights in our area. In addition to being unattractive, topping is stressful to trees and makes them unhealthy. Topped trees are weak and may become hazards that will drop branches or topple over.

Topping, also called stubbing, hatracking, dehorning, and heading, involves the removing or severe cutting back of large branches so that stubs remain. Often cuts are made at a uniform height, like flat-topping a hedge. While there are many good reasons to **prune** trees, there are **NO** good reasons to top trees. Here are some good reasons not to:

- ✓ Good pruning means removing no more than one-quarter of the crown of a tree and no more than 20% for very young or very old trees. If more is removed, it interferes with a tree's ability to manufacture food, as well as limiting its defense against disease and insects.
- ✓ Topping is done to reduce height and width of trees, but actually has the opposite effect. The resulting shoots (also called water sprouts) are so large in number and grow so rapidly that the tree returns to the original size quickly and has a large, dangerously dense crown.
- ✓ The sprouts and shoots resulting from topping are more weakly attached than natural limbs, and thus are more prone to breakage.
- ✓ A tree's foliage protects the tree's branches and trunk from the sun. When so much of the crown is removed at once, scalding and damage to bark may occur. If neighboring trees and shrubs depend on shade, they also will suffer without it.
- ✓ The large branch stubs left by topping have difficulty healing. The size and terminal location of these cuts leaves them especially vulnerable to disease and insect invasion. If decay is already present, its spread will be accelerated.
- ✓ Some trees suffer more damage from topping than others. Beech trees, for instance, don't regrow well after severe pruning and may die as a result of topping.
- ✓ A topped tree is a disfigured tree. It will never regain the appearance that is characteristic of its species, and its aesthetic value will be forever changed.

If topping is so bad, why is it so popular? Topping is simple and fast. It requires little skill on the worker's part and even less knowledge. Therefore, topping is cheap. This is especially true when compared to hiring a skilled pruner who is knowledgeable about these trees. The price of topping is low, but the hidden cost of topping reduces property value. An appraiser will automatically reduce the value of a topped tree a **minimum** of one-third.

The expense of removing and replacing sick or dead trees is great. The replacement of other damaged trees and shrubs due to changed light conditions may also be necessary. The danger (and liability) of weakened branches and the toppling of trees is possibly the greatest potential cost of topping.

And lastly, topping increases future maintenance. The tree regains its former size quickly, and removing sprouts and other weak growth becomes an ongoing yearly expense.

There are alternatives to topping that preserve a tree's appearance and its usefulness. For trees that are now oversized, selectively thin out branches by pruning them back to lower lateral branches. Leave only the collar of the pruned branch, no stubs. The tree's overall size will be reduced without sacrificing its natural structure and beauty. The best and easiest alternative to topping is to plant the right tree in the right place in the first place. Select a tree that **at maturity** is the correct height and width for its site. Begin training and pruning early, and continue pruning lightly every year. This gently keeps growth under control and avoids the necessity of traumatic measures in later years. Do not fertilize heavily with nitrogen. In fact, if a tree has good growth each year, it probably doesn't need any fertilizer.

Trees are valuable assets to our home and commercial landscape, neighborhoods, and communities. Through education and voluntary action, topping can be eliminated, and we will all benefit.