P

runing trees correctly can often solve problems associated with the decision to top trees. By removing a few strategically-located branches can help to frame a view or provide more sunshine for a vegetable garden.

While trees can and do fail due to disease, insect infestation, or human-caused activities, a tree will not fall over just because it is tall. It is important to remember that as trees grow, they develop structure and strength in response to the environment around them. Careful pruning within the first dozen years of a tree’s life can help eliminate the need for drastic pruning when the tree is mature.

If you are concerned with the health and safety of a tree, call a professional to assess its condition. Certified arborists are professionals trained in planting, care, and maintenance of trees. You can locate a certified arborist by looking in the phone book under “Tree Services,” or by visiting treesregood.org.

Before hiring an arborist, ask for credentials and make sure the company does not offer tree topping services; legitimate tree care companies do not practice tree topping. If problems caused by a tree cannot be solved through acceptable management practices, the tree should be removed and replaced with a different tree or plant material more appropriate for the site.

Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

Property owners should educate themselves about trees before selecting the best tree for their yard. Planting the right tree in the right place will go far to eliminate future problems. Make sure to carefully evaluate the space before choosing a tree to plant. “Look up, down and all around.” Remember to think about the mature size (height and width) of a tree, and the space it will grow in to, including the space needed for roots. There are many online sources and books that will give you dimensions of mature trees.

Trees range in height from small trees, generally shorter than 25 feet at maturity, to those that surpass 100 feet. They also come in all kinds of shapes, height, and spreading. Select a tree that fits the scale and size of the available space.

For more information about tree selection, planting, care and maintenance, contact the city forester in your community, DNR’s Urban and Community Forestry program at dnr.wa.gov or visit treesregood.org.

Alternatives to Topping

Trees Add Property Value

Over the course of time, a tree that is properly cared for increases in value, which in turn increases property value.

New economic research from the US Forest Service Pacific Northwest (PNW) Research Station found that well-maintained, mature trees not only increase the price of a home, but it also sells more quickly with healthy trees. For example: In Portland Oregon, the presence of street trees in front or near a house was found to add an average of $8,870 to the sale price.

Consult with a certified arborist to create a care and maintenance action plan that ensures a healthy, valuable tree in your landscape.

To find out the many ecological services a tree provides, including energy savings, cleaner air, carbon sequestration and more, visit the National Tree Benefits Calculator web site: www.treesbenefits.com/calculator/

The Washington Community Forestry Program was organized by the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in 1991. Its goal is to provide leadership and vision to high quality urban, plant and community trees and forests. The Council consists of a general membership and an Executive Advisory Committee to the State Forester. Join by calling 1-800-523-TREE.

REFERENCE

Five Reasons to Stop Topping Trees, and Saving Trees: Vivas Brochures, Plant Amnesty, Seattle, WA 98115-0377.
Hodges, C.A. et al Warring Topping is Hazardous to Your Tree’s Health, Journal of Arboriculture U2029February 1996
Why Topping Hurts Trees brochure, 2007, International Society of Arboricultur, P.O. Box 1218, Champaign, IL 61820-1218
Linda Chalker-Scott, The Myth of Tree Topping Internet brochure.

CAUTION TOPPED TREE CAUTION TOPPED

Tree Topping

A common practice that results in disfigured trees with large gaping wounds, susceptible to disease and insect infestation.

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Trees that are topped lose their natural beauty, form, safety, and function along with their appraised value.

Science of Topping
A tree’s leafy canopy is its food source. It’s the place where nutrients and water, along with chlorophyll and sunlight, make sugars to sustain the tree. Following significant damage, (like topping), a tree kicks into ‘survival mode,’ growing replacement branches as quickly as possible to prevent starvation (see “A”).

Topping trees is not safe. It costs more long-term, it hurts trees and shortens their life.

Topping nearly guarantees a hazardous tree. Topping cuts create entry-points for decay, which affect the structural integrity of the tree.

Careful pruning within the first dozen years of a tree’s life can help eliminate the need for drastic pruning when the tree is mature.

A Dangerous Situation

Well pruned trees are stronger and can withstand storms better than trees that have been topped.

There are various reasons that individuals choose to have their trees topped, but whether the reason is for height reduction, ease of maintenance, cost savings, clearing view corridors, or solar access, the results do not meet the expectation.

So Why Do Trees Get Topped?

Rather than reduce maintenance time and cost, the greater mass of leaf area results in dense growth that not only obscures views and sunlight even more, but adds to the volume of leaf clean-up and maintenance costs.

Trees that are topped lose their natural beauty, form, safety, and function along with their appraised value. The liability posed by a topped tree may actually decrease property value.

Strong connection

A. Branch shoots that re-grow following topping often grow directly adjacent to developing decay columns within a topped branch.

Weak attachment

Disease entry

Topped deciduous tree, one year later

Disease entry

Topped conifer tree, one year later

Weak attachment

A. As shoots grow into larger and heavier branches, they are prone to breakage, especially during storms, creating a safety hazard.

A topped tree can easily regain its original height within a couple of years. The re-grown branches are generally long, thin, densely spaced, and weakly attached to the main stem. Branches will require pruning every couple of years in order to maintain the intended height and prevent branch failures. This puts a tremendous strain on a tree and significantly raises the risk of insect infestation, disease, decay, and death.

What does this mean for the homeowner?

Because the sprouts that grow out of the branches of a topped tree are very weakly attached, and prone to breakage, there is an increased risk of property or personal injuries, along with homeowner liability (see “B”).

Would you knowingly create a dangerous, public nuisance in your front yard or irreversibly damage your home to reduce its property value? Of course not! Yet when you top a tree, its natural form is destroyed, which diminishes its value, creates potentially hazardous branches, and impacts the value of your property.