

STOPPING THE TOPPING

Topping is the indiscriminate cutting of tree branches to stubs or lateral branches that are not large enough to assume the terminal role. Other names for topping include “heading,” “tipping,” “hat-racking,” and “rounding over.”

The most common reason given for topping is to reduce the size of a tree. Home owners often feel that their trees have become too large for their property. People fear that tall trees may pose a hazard. Topping, however, is not a viable method of height reduction and certainly does not reduce the hazard. In fact, topping will make a tree more hazardous in the long term.

Reasons NOT to top a tree:

1. Topping Creates Hazards

The survival mechanism that causes a tree to produce multiple shoots below each topping cut comes at great expense to the tree. These shoots are anchored only in the outermost layers of the parent branches. The new shoots grow quickly, as much as 20 feet in one year, in some species. These shoots are prone to breaking, especially during windy conditions. The irony is that while the goal was to reduce the tree’s height to make it safer, it has been made more hazardous than before.

2. Topping Is Expensive

The cost of topping a tree may appear to be cheaper than proper pruning, but, if the tree survives, it will require pruning again within a few years. It will either need to be reduced again or storm damage will have to be cleaned up. If the tree dies, it will have to be removed.

Topping is a high-maintenance pruning practice, with some hidden costs. One is the reduction in property value. Healthy, well-maintained trees can add 10 to 20 percent to the value of a property. Disfigured, topped trees are considered an impending expense.

Another possible cost of topped trees is potential liability. Topped trees are prone to breaking and can be hazardous. Because topping is considered an unacceptable pruning practice, any damage caused by branch failure of a topped tree may lead to a finding of negligence in a court of law.

3. Topping Stresses Trees

Topping often removes 50 to 100 percent of the leaf-bearing crown of a tree. Because leaves are the food factories of a tree, removing them can temporarily starve a tree. The severity of the pruning triggers a sort of survival mechanism. The tree activates latent buds, forcing the rapid growth of multiple shoots below each cut. The tree needs to put out a new crop of leaves as soon as possible. If a tree does not have the stored energy reserves to do so, it will be seriously weakened and may die.

A stressed tree is more vulnerable to insect and disease infestations. Large, open pruning wounds expose the sapwood and heartwood to attacks. The tree may lack sufficient energy to chemically defend the wounds against invasion, and some insects are actually attracted to the chemical signals trees release.

4. Topping is a Violation to the Tree Bylaw

Section 4.6 a. of the Maple Ridge Tree Protection and Management Bylaw prohibits “topping so as to significantly alter a tree’s natural canopy except if the tree forms part of a hedge”. Topping of a tree may result in a fine of \$500, plus the requirement to get a tree permit for tree removal and replacement.

Alternatives to Topping

Sometimes a tree must be reduced in height or spread. Providing clearance for utility lines is an example. There are recommended techniques for doing so. If practical, branches should be removed back to their point of origin. If a branch must be shortened, it should be cut back to a lateral that is large enough to assume the terminal role. A rule of thumb is to cut back to a lateral that is at least one-third the diameter of the limb being removed.

This method of branch reduction helps to preserve the natural form of the tree. However, if large cuts are involved, the tree may not be able to close over and compartmentalize the wounds. Sometimes the best solution is to remove the tree and replace it with a species that is more appropriate for the site.