

Are There Any Benefits To Tree Topping?

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Do you know what tree topping is? If not, are you the problem? Would you allow an old maintenance practice that decreases tree asset values, destroys future value appreciation and increases liability risks? Would you allow a structurally and biologically abusive practice to damage trees for life?

Are you tree-illiterate? Would you clearly demonstrate to other landscape managers-and the public alike-that you have failed to comply with national tree-pruning standards (ANSI-A300) and with professional tree-pruning guidelines (International Society of Arboriculture pruning guidelines)?

Can you afford to show people how professionally ignorant and antiquated you and your landscape-management program are? Can you afford to pay tripled, quadrupled or more maintenance costs to recover from reactions and injuries you have initiated-year after year?

Tree topping is a plague on the landscape that damages trees, tree owners and landscape professionals (both literally and figuratively). For decades, many have fought to educate the uninformed, to protect tree resources and to chastise the guilty. And yet our landscapes abound with permanently, seriously injured trees standing as tall banners to "management-by-myth" ways.

How many generations must endure these aesthetic abominations, safety risks and maintenance nightmares before we actually change how we do our jobs-both as professional practitioners and as advocates for modern tree care? If you think this is about you, maybe it is!

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Yes, there are benefits to tree topping if done by a skilled professional. In most cases that I have experienced, customers would rather not lose a living tree if it has a problem that you can remedy. Simply stated, most trees grow too slowly for the average homeowner to be able to enjoy the replacement tree.

The most frequent reason for topping a tree is to reduce the potential for storm damage. The overall height of the tree and length of the limbs equate to leverage that (mixed with flaws in the tree that are frequently unnoticed) strong winds can bend with disastrous result. Skillful topping (I

employ the drop-crotch method in most instances) removes most of the potential for such an occurrence.

Another common reason for topping a tree is to reduce interference with something else (for example, power lines or a larger tree) without losing the tree. Surprisingly, it is this kind of trimming (especially under power lines) that can require the most skill on the part of arborists. It can be difficult to accomplish the objective without detracting too much from the natural aesthetics of the tree.

A third category of topping (although rare) has to do with changing the center of gravity of a tree to correct a leaning condition. Basically, you are trying to reduce the overall height of the tree (via leverage and selectively removing limbs from the downhill side of the tree) to coax the tree to achieve nearly perpendicular status again, thereby helping to assure its longevity and the safety of residents and the property underneath.

Taking off a lot of the tree, which it needs to maintain its health, opens the tree up to a lot of wounds and makes it susceptible to disease. You're setting yourself up for failure, and you're opening up the tree to death. Plus, aesthetically, it looks bad. People [perform tree topping], and then they wonder why so many trees die.-Leah S. Burow, owner, Blackhawk Lawn Care Co. (Fort Atkinson, Wis.)

I call this technique arbor-icide. Tree topping is the brutalization of a tree. There are no benefits to it. But, if a tree is damaged, you may have to top it if you want to save it. There are occasions when it has to be done, but that's only to repair damage. It doesn't make it safer, although many people cite that as a reason for performing it. Tree topping actually makes the tree more dangerous.-Lew Bloch, consulting arborist/landscape architect (Potomac, Md.)

I can't think of any benefits. If you have to top trees to accommodate power lines, then I guess we have to. But the artistic side of me says there's got to be a better way. The only benefit may be to the tree companies that are receiving higher revenues from performing this practice. But when I drive around in the winter and see topped trees, it just makes me feel sick.-Martin J. Grunder Jr., founder and president, Grunder Landscaping Co. (Miamisburg, Ohio)

My working definition of pruning is, "The removal of plant parts to benefit the remaining parts." The practice of topping just does not fulfill this goal. Topping actually promotes decay or death of remaining branch stubs and production of weakly attached water sprouts. Most importantly, topping destroys the individual tree's natural shape and beauty.-Larry Stouse, president, Horticulture Solutions, Consulting & Seminars (Shawnee, Kan.)