

Pruning, NOT Topping is Key to Healthy Trees and Property Values

(This article is excerpted from an article written by Karen Neill, Extension Agent for Agriculture and Urban Horticulture, Guilford County Cooperative Extension)

Tree damage is common when winter ice storms hit. Bradford Pears were demolished; River Birch lost their tops and Leyland Cypress are laying over. Unfortunately, storms frighten some people into removing or drastically pruning (topping) valuable tree resources. It's important to avoid hasty decisions about pruning until you've evaluated the tree in relationship to the overall landscape or had a professional (an ISA certified arborist) do this for you. Trees play a major role in our lives socially, economically and environmentally.

Nothing saddens and angers me more than to see trees that have been permanently desecrated by topping. It is more than an assault on beauty; it is unnecessary stress and increased risk to the trees' health. Many people are uninformed about the consequences of topping and unaware of better pruning alternatives. Some of the trees being topped are irreplaceable.

Eight good reasons not to top your trees are:

Starvation. Good pruning practices rarely remove more than one-fourth to one-third of the leafy crown, which does not seriously interfere with the ability of a tree's crown to manufacture food. Topping removes so much of the tree that it upsets the crown-to-root ratio and temporarily cuts off a tree's food-making ability.

Shock. A tree's crown is like an umbrella that shields much of the tree from the direct rays of the sun. By suddenly removing this protection, the remaining bark tissue is so exposed that scalding may result.

Insects and diseases. The large stubs of a topped tree have a difficult time forming callus, thus making them highly vulnerable to insect invasion and decay.

Weak limbs. The wood in a new limb that sprouts after a larger limb is cut is weakly attached. A limb that develops normally is stronger.

Rapid new growth. The goal of topping is to control the height and spread of a tree, but it has just the opposite effect. New sprouts are far more numerous than normal growth, and they lengthen so quickly that the tree returns to its original height in a short time.

Tree death. Some trees are more tolerant to topping than others. Beeches, for example, do not sprout readily, and severe pruning can kill the tree.

Ugliness. The landscape and the community are robbed of a valuable asset. A topped tree is a disfigured tree. Even with its regrowth, it never regains the grace and character of its species.

Cost. It may cost less to top trees in the short run, but the costs of topping are hidden. These include reduced property value, the expense of removal and replacement if the tree dies, the loss of other trees and shrubs if they succumb to changed light conditions, the risk of liability from weakened branches and increased future maintenance.

Effective Planning and Pruning

There are times when the size and shape of a shade tree need to be controlled. This can be accomplished without marring the tree's beauty or usefulness.

Healthier alternatives to topping are:

Choose and plant trees that will fit your available space when they reach maturity.

- Begin proper pruning early in the life span of a tree.
- To slow growth of a tree, avoid the use of nitrogen fertilizer and prune properly and regularly.
- A light pruning every three years will keep your tree in a healthy condition.
- The best alternative to topping is called drop-crotching. The results can be

amazing.

Drop-crotching is a method that combines thinning the crown of a tree and reducing its

height and spread. With care, drop-crotching can reduce the tree's size while at the

same time retaining the species' natural form.

If you've lost trees or have room consider adding a few more trees to your landscape. The trees we plant now that will become the large, stately trees for future generations – a living legacy!