8 Reasons why not to top your trees

Starvation: Topping involves the removal of most, or all, of the tree canopy, which causes a dramatic decrease in food production for the tree that is created through photosynthesis in foliage.

Shock: Not only is decreased food production affecting the tree, but infiltration of sunlight to parts of the tree that have not seen direct sunlight in previous growing seasons will occur. This can cause sun scald on the bark of limbs.

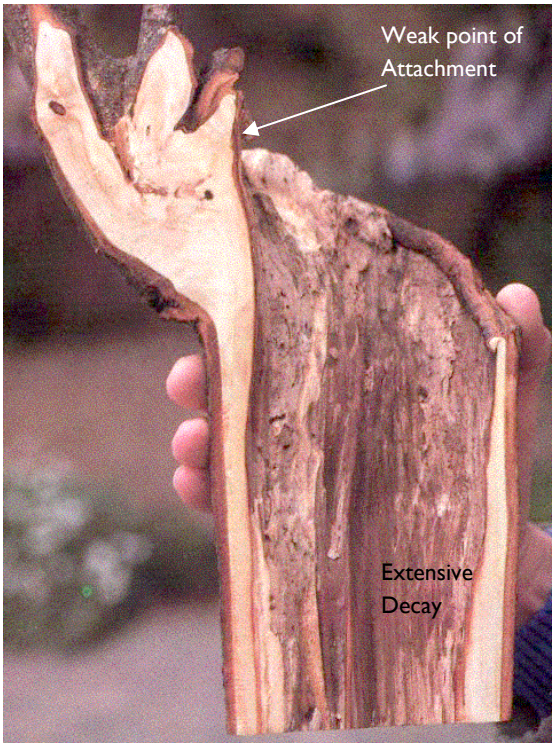
Insects and Disease: By cutting a limb off you are leaving a large wound on a tree that could take considerable time to heal. This will make the possibility of decay much greater, especially if there is already decay already in the limb.

Rapid new growth: Topping is usually done to shorten the height of a tree. While topping is a temporary fix to tree height, new sprouts that grow from cut areas will grow back much faster than normal growth. This defeats the purpose of height control.

Weak limbs: Because the new limbs will grow so fast, they will be much weaker than normal limb growth. This is because the growth of new cells in the new limbs will be elongated due to faster growth, therefore weaker. Weaker limbs will also occur due to weaker limb attachment. This can be worse if rot already exists at that site. Trees compartmentalize their wounds much better if the cuts are made at an acceptable crotch, which is not done when trees are topped.

Tree Death: Topping trees, obviously puts a tremendous amount of stress on the tree. Such stress could very likely cause the tree to die, especially if the tree is already under stress. If the tree already has cavities, and topping creates more wounds, the tree could fall apart after further decay has occured.

Ugliness: Some people will say that topping a tree will cause the tree to produce more concentrated amounts of foliage. While this may happen, it will take some time for this to occur, since branches do not grow overnight. Plus, in the fall and winter, these trees look awful without any foliage.



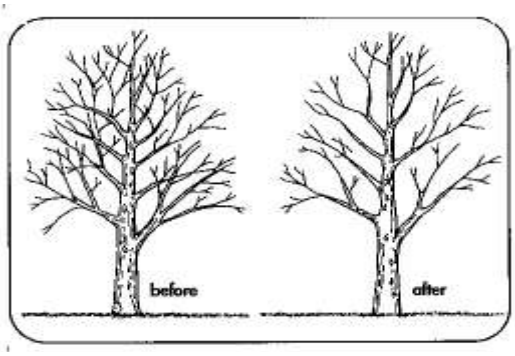
This is from a formally topped limb

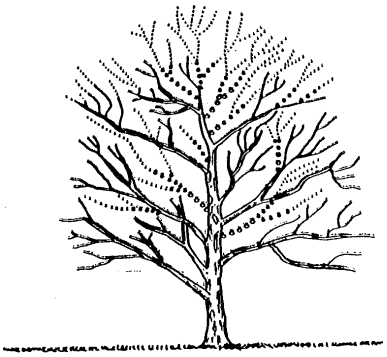
Cost: Because a tree has been topped, it will cause the value of your property to go down. But what about the old saying, “Topping a tree is cheap!” Many people say this, but it is not true. Topping trees will require you to perform more maintenance on the tree in the future, therefore increaseing long range costs.

Alternatives to Topping

There are two common reasons whey trees are topped. 1) trees are getting too big, or 2) tree has been topped before and needs to be topped again. Most of the time, a tree can be pruned properly without resorting to topping. The following are some alternatives to topping trees.

Crown cleaning and/or crown thinning: Crown cleaning is the removal of dead, diseased, crossing, or defective limbs to improve the health and structure of the tree. Crown Thinning is Crown cleaning with the additional removal of selected branches to increase light penetration and wind movement, and to decrease weight in the canopy. Either of these pruning practices can usually be used to obtain a given objective without resorting to topping. Remember not to remove more than 1/4 (25%) of the leaf bearing canopy at one time.





Crown Reduction: This form of pruning can be done to reduce the height of the canopy, without sever pruning cuts. This is done by pruning limbs back to their point of origin or back to laterals capable of sustaining the remaining limb and assuming apical dominance. For this to be acceptable a remaining lateral branch must be at least one third the diameter of the removed branch. This form of pruning is not to be confused with heading back limbs, which is improper. Notice in the picture to the right how the dotted limbs are selected for removal. After the tree is pruned, the tree will still have a natural form.

Crown Restoration: I have too often heard tree pruners claim that once a tree has been topped, it must only receive topping for the reason that it must will not be able to sustain the heavy new growth due to weak nature of the limbs, and decay. This statement is incorrect, because many formally topped trees can be pruned correctly afterwards, especially if it is done soon after the initial topping. Crown restoration pruning is the selective pruning of limbs to restore a tree back to it's natural growth habit after storm damage or being topped. One to three sprouts on a main branch are selected to become permanent branches and to reform a more natural appearing crown. This pruning practice usually requires numerous pruning over a number of years.

Removal: Severe storm damage, past topping, and years of neglect can cause a tree to be beyond the point of restoration. In these situations there may be no other option other than removing the tree, but some people wonder why a tree like this shouldn't be topped rather than removed so they can keep the tree longer. If the tree is already damaged beyond the point of proper pruning, what is the point of keeping it around? If the same tree lives through another topping, it will only become more hazardous, so why not remove the hazard now? Some claim that they do not want to loose the shade, but do they realize that they would loose the shade anyways due to topping, at least for a few years. What about those that are worried about the tree falling on their home? Sure, weak limbs may be removed now, but they will only grow back again, and as rot further develops into the tree, the new limbs will be even more hazardous. It may be a better idea to plant a more appropriate species now, therefore saving future headaches? But what if the tree has sentimental value? Replanting another tree, to replace and remember the tree that was once there may help.

Developed by the City of Evansville, Department of Urban Forestry. For further questions, call 436-5752