



## PRUNING – The Right Alternative to Tree Topping

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Tree topping damages otherwise healthy trees. A topped tree will grow back to its original height, but its natural form will be lost. There are alternatives to the unsightly and arbitrary removal of healthy limbs and branches common to the topping process we see all across Indiana. Regular pruning will eliminate the need for topping in the long run and will help maintain a healthy growth pattern for your trees.

The first alternative is to select the right tree and plant it in the right place when landscaping a new home, farmstead or building. A large number of native tree species are available and one has the characteristics to fit every location. Avoid overhead power lines and underground utilities. Some short species are acceptable and will perform well under utility lines. “Right Tree – Right Place” simply means selecting a tree that will have the right mature height, crown spread, shade, flowering, fruiting and other characteristics to meet the owners desires and that fit the space available for planting.

A second alternative is to remove the undesirable tree and replace it. Follow the right tree – right place guidelines.

Finally, when keeping the tree is desired, pruning may be the answer. Proper pruning removes limbs where they are attached to a larger branch or the tree trunk. Other terms such as crown reduction or crown thinning are often applied to the pruning process. Both have specific purposes. Crown reduction is the selective removal of entire branches so that the overall height of the tree is shortened. Crown thinning reduces the density of branches and limbs, cutting down on the wind resistance. Both of these techniques reduce the over all tree size while maintaining most of its natural shape.

While deciduous trees can be pruned anytime during the year, the best time to prune is late winter or early spring before the trees leaf out. Some trees, such as maples, bleed heavily when pruned in late winter or early spring. The heavy bleeding, however, doesn't harm the trees. The trees won't bleed to death and the flow of sap will gradually slow and stop. To prevent the spread of oak wilt, avoid pruning oaks from March 15<sup>th</sup> to July 15<sup>th</sup>. Pruning oaks during this period may attract sap beetles carrying the oak wilt fungus to the pruning cuts and transmit the disease to healthy trees. An excellent time to prune oaks is February and early March.

Some pruning tips to keep in mind:

- Remove limbs growing toward the ground.
- Remove limbs that are crossing, rubbing or growing parallel to one another competing for the same space in the tree crown
- Remove limbs growing vertical or toward the tree interior.



- Remove broken, cracked, diseased or dead limbs.
- It's wise to keep one central leader for as long as possible.
- As a tree grows lower limbs may be removed or lifted to keep the lowest one-third of the trunk free of limbs.
- Cutting should never remove so many interior branches that leaves are only present at the tips of branches.
- Don't leave branch stubs when pruning, but also do not prune flush to the trunk, since flush cuts cause a larger wound and reduces the natural barrier of the tree to decay.
- Lastly never top your trees or allow any tree service to do the same as this leaves the tree vulnerable to decay, sucks energy from the tree and leads to an early demise.

Join with your local County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) in the "Plant a Million" project. This project is encouraging the planting of more than a million native trees in central Indiana and is helping homeowners and others learn how to manage and take proper care of their existing trees. Stop by the SWCD Office and learn more about the project and to pick up your copy of *Your Yard, Your Trees*. This 70 page full color book will answer many of your tree planting and care questions.

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