



Tree Topping - A Future Disaster

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Next to the home itself, trees in the landscape are often the most valuable part of a home investment in the city or country. There is so much tree topping going on in Central Indiana and across the country that most people believe topping is an important tree management technique. It is not for a lot of reasons. Topping is the excessive and somewhat arbitrary removal of all parts of a tree above a certain height or certain limb diameters. In any case it leaves a stubby appearance and since the tree is looking for a way to get back its needed amount of leaf surface for food production, topping creates rapid growth of new branches at the point of topping.

This new sprout growth is extremely weak because the sprouts are attached to the surface of the stubs rather than being anchored from within the former limbs. In a few years these new branches begin to break loose creating safety hazards and the need to “top” again. The large wounds created by topping are very slow to heal and in cases of large stubs may never heal. This creates places for insects and organisms that cause rot to invade the trees main stem.

Not only does topping create weak new growth, it also severely weakens the remnant tree. The tree has to take “money out of the bank” (starch out of storage) to re-grow at a time when much of its stored starches have been lost by topping. Trees normally spend their energy reserves on things like making defensive chemicals to protect themselves from diseases and pests. When they are too energy deficient to do this, the result is a tree which is more vulnerable to decay, disease and insects.

There is a practice called crown reduction, which can be used to reduce a tree’s height. After a crown reduction the tree will eventually grow back to its original height, but it will not be the weakened stubby hulk that topping would have created. Crown reduction is the removal of complete branches at the point of connection to the trunk or large branch that reach high into the tree crown. This practice works best on deciduous trees (not evergreens). Another practice called crown thinning can reduce the risk of a tree blowing over in high winds. This is the selective pruning of limbs throughout the tree to reduce the wind resistance. Both these practices require significantly more knowledge and skill than topping and should only be performed by qualified persons.

Topping is only a short-term fix to the perceived problem that a tree is too tall. A logical solution when a short tree is wanted is to remove the existing tree and plant a tree species of shorter mature height.

Join with the Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) in the exciting new Plant A Million project. This effort is helping landowners and others learn about the importance of proper tree care. Stop by the SWCD office to learn about Plant A Million and to get a copy of “Your Yard, Your Trees”. This 70-page book will answer many of your tree care questions. Find your local SWCD at www.plantamillion.org on the Contact Us page.