



What's Wrong with Topping Trees??

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Topping – an important tree management practice or technique?? There is so much of it going on in Central Indiana and across the country that most people believe so. The opposite is true. Arborists and other forestry specialists say it is the most unprofessional, unsightly, outrageous, immoral, unethical practice in the urban areas today. Nothing, they say, causes more damage to an otherwise healthy tree.

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.

The Purdue School of Forestry points out several reasons that topping trees is wrong.

Starvation – Trees need leaves to manufacture food (starches). Topping removes so much of the leafy crown that a tree may be unable to provide the roots with food. This in turn prevents the roots from growing and transporting nutrients and water to its leaves. The tree starves. Good pruning rarely removes more than one-third of the leafy crown.

Shock – The tree crown acts like an umbrella, shading the bark from the direct sunlight of summer. Sudden removal of the leafy layer exposes the bark to sunscald. Poor health and death often occur.

Insects and disease – Large wounds left by topping have difficulty closing. The stubs are open wounds that invite insect invasions and the spread of decay fungi.

Weak limbs – Many new limbs sprout from the cut stub as the tree tries to produce new leaves to manufacture food. These new limbs are attached at the surface around the stub and are not deeply attached within the tree and frequently break off during wind or ice storms.

Rapid new growth – People believe they need to top trees to control the height and spread of the tree. Actually the opposite happens. The new sprouts grow very fast and the tree quickly regains the height it once had and the need to “top” is again present.

Tree death – Some species of trees, such as beech, do not tolerate topping. They sprout very little new growth and the result is likely death of the tree.

Ugliness – A topped tree is a disfigured tree. Even with regrowth, it never regains the grace and beauty



of its species. The landscape and the community are robbed of a valuable asset.

Cost – A chain saw and a truck are not all that is needed to properly prune a tree. Topping may reduce the initial cost, but the actual costs include reduced property values, removal and replacement of the tree when the tree dies, loss of other trees and shrubs that succumb to the changed light conditions, risk of liability from weakened branches and increased future pruning costs.

Your County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) is working with the Hoosier Heartland Resource Conservation and Development Council in ten Central Indiana Counties to encourage people to join in the Plant a Million project. This project encourages the planting of native trees and helps people learn to take proper care of their trees. Stop by or call the SWCD Office to learn more about this valuable effort.

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