

Alternatives to Topping

Pruning trees correctly can often solve problems associated with the decision to top trees. Thinning a few strategically-located branches can help to frame a view or provide more sunshine for a vegetable garden.

While trees can and do fail due to disease, insect infestation, or human-caused activities, a tree will not fall over just because it is tall. It is important to remember that as trees grow, they develop structure and strength in response to the environment around them. **Careful pruning within the first dozen years of a tree's life can help eliminate the need for drastic pruning when the tree is mature.**

If you are concerned with the health and safety of a tree, call a professional to assess its condition. Certified arborists are professionals trained in planting, care, and maintenance of trees. You can locate a certified arborist by looking in the phone book under "Tree Services," or by visiting treesaregood.org.

Before hiring an arborist, ask for credentials and make sure the company does not offer tree topping services; legitimate tree care companies do not practice tree topping. If problems caused by a tree cannot be solved through acceptable management practices, the tree should be removed and replaced with a different tree or plant material more appropriate for the site.

Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

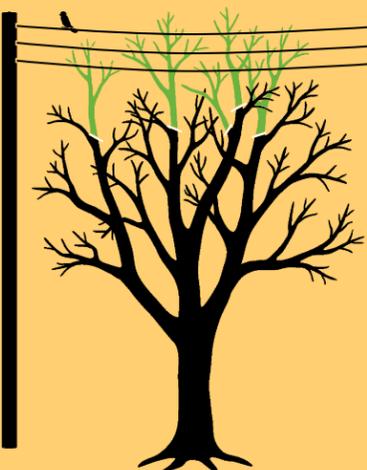
Property owners should educate themselves about trees before selecting the best tree for their yard. Planting the right tree in the right place will go far to eliminate future problems. Make sure to carefully evaluate the space before choosing a tree to plant. "Look up, down and all around." Remember to think about the mature size (height and width) of a tree, and the space it will grow in to, including the space needed for roots. There are many online sources and books that will give you dimensions of mature trees.

Trees range in height from small trees, generally shorter than 25 feet at maturity, to those that surpass 100 feet. They also come in all kinds of shapes; from columnar to round and spreading. Select a tree that fits the scale and size of the available space.

For more information about tree selection, planting, care and maintenance, contact the city forester in your community, DNR's Urban and Community Forestry program at dnr.wa.gov, or visit treesaregood.org



▲ Trees properly sited only need pruning to maintain tree structure, form, health and appearance.



▲ Crown reduction lowers the height of a tree by cutting tall branches back to shorter, large diameter side branches—at least 1/3 the diameter of those being removed. This method is preferred over topping.

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Trees Add Property Value

Over the course of time, a tree that is properly cared for increases in value, which in turn increases property value.

New economic research from the US Forest Service Pacific Northwest (PNW) Research Station found that well-maintained, mature trees not only increase the price of a home, but it also sells more quickly with healthy trees. *For example: In Portland Oregon, the presence of street trees in front or near a house was found to add an average of \$8,870 to the sale price.*

Consult with a certified arborist to create a care and maintenance action plan that ensures a healthy, valuable tree in your landscape.

To find out the many ecological services a tree provides, including energy savings, cleaner air, carbon sequestration and more, visit the National Tree Benefits Calculator web page: www.trebenefits.com/calculator/



ILLUSTRATION ADAPTED FROM "TOPPING—TREE CARE OR TREE ABUSE" PUBLICATION FROM IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY.

The Washington Community Forestry Council was organized by the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in 1991. Its goal is to provide leadership and vision to help citizens preserve, plant and maintain community trees and forests. The Council consists of a general membership and an Executive Advisory Committee to the State Forester. Join by calling **1-800-523-TREE**.

"Tree Link" is a quarterly publication of the DNR Urban & Community Forestry Program. The program's purpose is to educate citizens and decision-makers about the economic, environmental, psychological and aesthetic benefits of trees and to assist local governments, citizen groups and volunteers in planting and sustaining healthy trees and vegetation wherever people live and work in Washington State.

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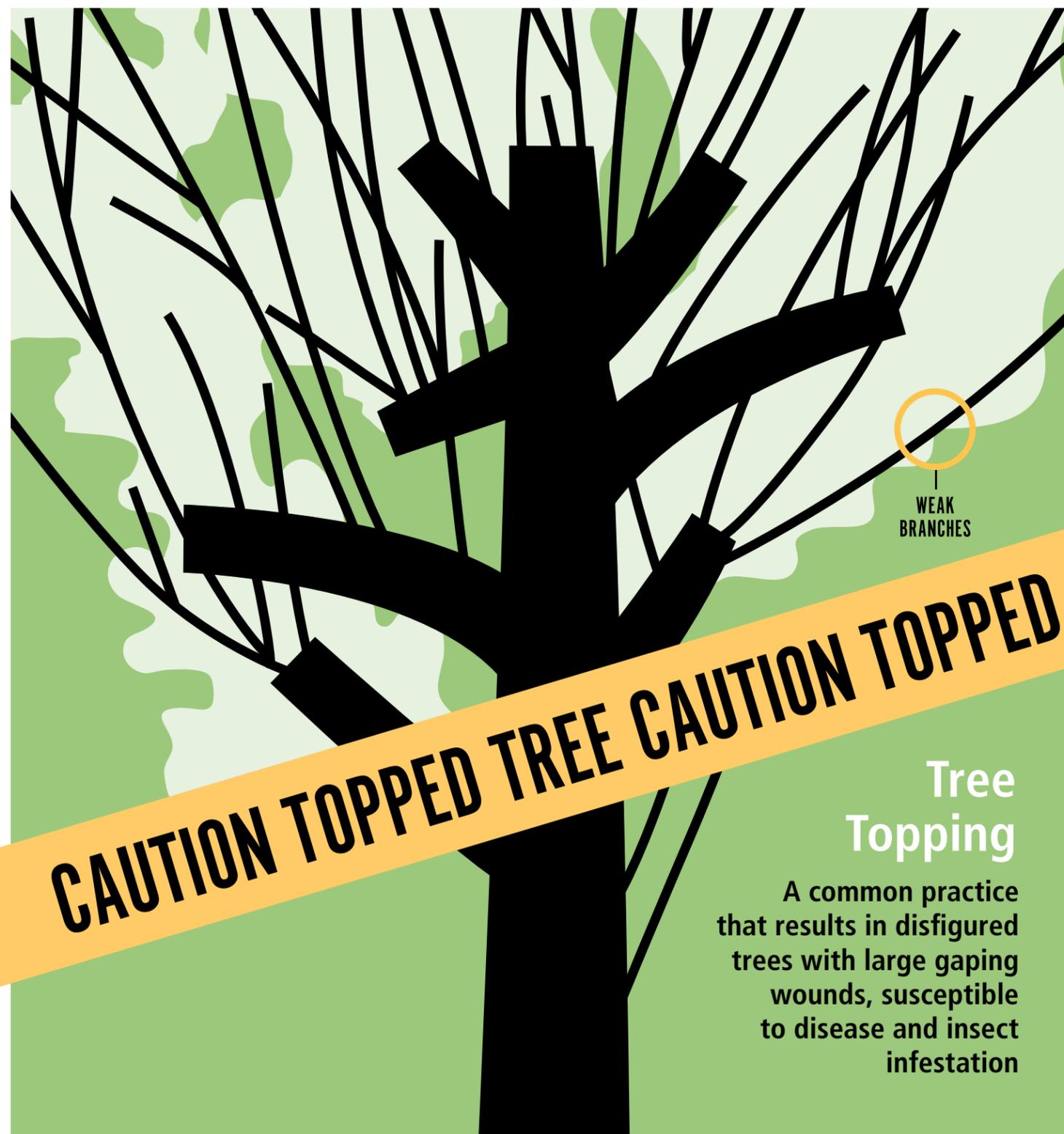
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Tree Topping

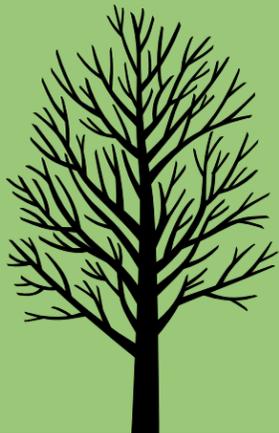
A common practice that results in disfigured trees with large gaping wounds, susceptible to disease and insect infestation



Trees that are topped lose their natural beauty, form, safety, and function along with their appraised value.



Topping trees is not safe. It costs more long-term, it hurts trees and shortens their life.



Careful pruning within the first dozen years of a tree's life can help eliminate the need for drastic pruning when the tree is mature.



Well pruned trees are stronger and can withstand storms better than trees that have been topped.



A Dangerous Situation

Topping nearly guarantees a hazardous tree. Topping cuts create entry points for decay, which affect the structural integrity of the tree.

A Branch shoots that re-grow following topping often grow directly adjacent to developing decay columns within a topped branch.

B As shoots grow into larger and heavier branches, they are prone to breakage, especially during storms, creating a safety hazard.

A topped tree can easily regain its original height within a couple of years. The re-grown branches are generally long, thin, densely spaced, and weakly attached to the main stem. Branches will require pruning every couple of years in order to maintain the intended height and prevent branch failures. This puts a tremendous strain on a tree and significantly raises the risk of insect infestation, disease, decay, and death.

▶ **Would you knowingly create a dangerous, public nuisance in your front yard or irreversibly damage your home to reduce its property value? Of course not! Yet when you top a tree, its natural form is destroyed, which diminishes its value, creates potentially hazardous branches, and impacts the value of your property.**

The term 'topping' refers to the practice of drastically cutting back large limbs, often indiscriminately leaving stubs, and resulting in injury; a tree will never recover from this. Topping, also known as stubbing, hat racking, rounding over, and heading, is an all too common practice that results in disfigured trees with large gaping wounds, susceptible to disease and insect infestation.

Science of Topping

A tree's leafy canopy is its food source. It's the place where nutrients and water, along with chlorophyll and sunlight, make sugars to sustain the tree. Following significant damage, (like topping), a tree kicks into 'survival mode,' growing replacement branches as quickly as possible to prevent starvation (see "A").

The tremendous amount of branch growth makes up for the loss of its food-making branches may create the appearance of a fuller and denser tree; however, this flush of growth forces the tree to tap into its energy reserves. The tree becomes weakened, stressed, and susceptible to insect and disease attack.

PHOTO FROM "TOPPING—TREE CARE OR TREE ABUSE" PUBLICATION FROM IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY



So Why Do Trees Get Topped?

There are various reasons that individuals choose to have their trees topped, but whether the reason is for height reduction, ease of maintenance, cost savings, clearing view corridors, or solar access, the results do not meet the expectation.

What does this mean for the homeowner?

Because the sprouts that grow out of the branches of a topped tree are **very weakly attached, and prone to breakage**, there is an increased risk of property or personal injuries, along with homeowner liability (see "B").

Rather than reduce maintenance time and cost, the greater mass of leaf area results in dense growth that not only obscures views and sunlight even more, but adds to the volume of leaf clean-up and maintenance costs.

Trees that are topped lose their natural beauty, form, safety, and function along with their appraised value. The liability posed by a topped tree may actually decrease property value.

