

Ag Column
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Topped Trees Are Ugly

Traditions of tree topping seems to persist even today. After many years of sharing the negative impact of tree topping, I still find that tree topping is often considered by homeowners. I really think this is just one of those traditions that has continued in spite of all the reasons to not “top” trees. Topping is actually the worst thing you can do for a tree that you want to keep in your landscape

Topping trees completely compromises their ability to carry on photosynthesis. Without leaves, the tree is left without a “food factory” to produce carbohydrates to feed its root system. This results in a declining root system and ultimately a weaker crown. Have you ever noticed how aggressively a topped tree responds to re-establish its leaves? The tree’s crown actually becomes very much overgrown and unsightly following topping. This is most noticeable in the winter.

The tree will regain its height within just a few years growing much faster than it would have if it had not been topped. An expensive cycle of topping every few years then becomes the norm in an attempt to overcome the tree’s desire to reach its mature height. The tree will never regain its natural form or its potential value as a landscape tree. The mass of water sprouts produced after topping prevent good airflow favoring disease development. This thick growth of limbs also makes a great environment for nuisance birds.

The topping of the tree leaves stubs that don’t heal which allow rot to develop in the tree. The new growth that emerges following topping is weakly attached to the tree. The tree actually becomes compromised due to the internal decay and the weakly attached limbs.

The most common reason for topping a tree, other than tradition, is to reduce its size. Trees are sometimes topped to prevent their interference with utility lines and buildings. A better alternative would be to select a tree that would reach a smaller mature size. The homeowner has a wide variety of trees from which to choose. Many trees such as crabapples, Japanese maples, service berries, dogwoods, and others don’t grow taller than 25 to 30 feet.

Remember, a topped tree becomes a liability instead of a valuable landscape asset. Topping hastens a tree’s decline and ultimate death and required removable. For more information about tree pruning, call your local Extension office.