

Monday, March 30, 2009



### **Topping Trees Is Unnecessary**

You don't have to drive very far to find a tree that has been "topped." Many years and generations seem to have established the practice of tree topping as an expected part of tree maintenance. The acceptance of tree topping as proper tree maintenance is an unfortunate myth. Topping is actually the worse thing you do for a tree that you want to keep in your landscape.

It amazes me each spring at the number of trees that are topped or headed indiscriminately. What happened to the lesson of photosynthesis we learned in school? After all, every living plant including trees use their leaves to produce sugar and oxygen through photosynthesis. When a tree is topped, its food factory is removed. Until it replaces those leaves, the tree can't produce sugar or a food source for its existence. Without a food source, trees become stressed making them more vulnerable to disease and insect pests. The topping of the tree leaves stubs that don't heal which allow rot to develop in the tree.

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.

A topped tree will regain its height, prior to topping, 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.

To summarize, tree topping is damaging to the health of the tree. It will not work as a method of controlling tree size without undermining the health of the tree. The tree is disfigured and devalued. The topped tree becomes a liability instead of a valuable landscape asset. For more information about tree pruning, call your local Extension office.