

# Lion-Tailing

## A Practice That Should Be Discontinued

Unfortunately and sadly, as I drive around the Santa Ynez Valley and Santa Barbara County I see trees which have been trimmed in the manner of Lion-Tailing. Many of these trees are hundreds of years old and can be seen on private, city, county and community properties. It is a practice of trimming, which we at Santa Ynez Valley Tree Care absolutely avoid. The practice of lion-tailing is like issuing a slow death warrant to a tree. The unsuspecting homeowner and community member is left to try to fix the problems created by this pruning practice and/or watch a beautiful tree die. My heart drops to the pit of my stomach when I see once healthy trees literally butchered by lion-tailing.

Lion-Tailing can be described as the excessive removal of branches from the lower two thirds of a stem or branch, or the removal of only lower and interior branches when pruning. This pruning practice, which leaves most branch tips untouched, shifts growth to the outer canopy (tops of the trees). Remaining branches grow longer than un-pruned branches, and branch taper is reduced. Water sprouts are often generated by the tree to replace the growth that has been removed. Branches suddenly exposed to direct sunlight often sustain sunburn damage. Tissues injured in this manner are often killed or attacked by secondary invaders such as borers, bark beetles and canker-causing pathogens. To the untrained eye, a lion-tailed tree may appear to be well groomed. Many tree trimmers who routinely lion-tail trees are unaware of the problems that they cause. Lion-tailing is harmful to trees and it increases susceptibility to wind-failure.

Clients may ask for this type of pruning because they're unaware that the practice is detrimental to their trees. It doesn't serve the client's best interest. Tree owners should be able to expect competence and integrity from their tree care professionals. Tree trimmers who practice lion-tailing create additional work for themselves. Homeowners have them returning every year or two to remove the water sprouts and fix other damage they created when they lion-tailed the trees. For these tree trimmers, money does grow on trees.

I've seen many tree failures that are a direct result of past poor pruning. For example, a client called me early one morning, complaining that a branch had broken out of his tree the night before and was embedded in his roof. He wanted the branch removed, but wanted to save the rest of the tree. The branch failed at the attachment to the main trunk. A large jagged wound remained on the trunk and the bark below was ripped down about 14 inches from the point where the branch failed. While examining the rest of the tree, I saw that the scaffolds (permanent or structural branches of a tree) had been exposed by pruning, and that there were numerous, small wounds throughout the interior. I also noted a profusion of new water sprouts. The outer canopy was very dense and some branches were beginning to bow downward. I saw no evidence of pruning in the outer canopy to reduce end-weight. Much to the homeowner's dismay, the tree was too damaged and we had to remove it.

The homeowner sheepishly informed me that he had the tree pruned about a year before, and that the contractor had explained the rationale for this type of trimming - "We remove all the unnecessary branches from the inside, and leave the crown full where the leaves can get light. The tree will look beautiful at night if you have your landscaper install lighting to accentuate the branch structure."

When pruning a tree there should be a reason for making each cut. Branches should not be removed just because they are in the tree trimmer's way, or because they are within pruning-pole reach. The main objective of pruning should be to reduce the risk of failure while maintaining tree health. This is not accomplished by stripping out interior branches and foliage. Crown-thinning and end-weight reducing is the best option for reducing the potential for failure. Thinning is the selective removal of small, live branches ranging from 1/4 to 1 inch in diameter to reduce crown density. The majority of these small branches should be removed within the canopy edge. Proper thinning should result in an even distribution of foliage throughout the crown.

Lion-tailing is commonplace, and in some communities has become the norm. Those tree trimmers who practice lion-tailing either lack adequate knowledge about proper tree pruning, or are not ethically bound to provide competent and professional services to their clients. Tree care practitioners have a responsibility to their clients to ensure that the trees entrusted to them are properly cared for. As with topping, this vestige of the 'dark ages' of Arboriculture belongs in the history books. For additional information on proper tree pruning practices call our office at Santa Ynez Valley Tree Care or go to our web site.

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