

A Tree's Biggest Enemy • TOPPING

Tree topping was considered for years to be the easiest and cheapest way to make mature trees safer and reduce their size. Whether it's because of tradition or ignorance, millions of trees have been hacked with little or no consideration to their health and structural integrity. People who top trees have yet to recognize that following established industry standards of professionalism while pruning trees can improve their health, growth and appearance.

What happens when trees are topped?

Trees maintain a delicate crown-to-root ratio. Topping removes the crown, upsetting this ratio and limiting the tree's ability to sustain its own roots. This makes them more susceptible to insects, disease and decay. Limbs weakened by decay cannot handle the weight of rapid re-growth. In a few years, if the tree survives, it may become a bigger safety hazard than it was prior to topping.

Picture this: You visit your manicurist because your nails are too long. She agrees you have a problem and recommends you have your whole arm removed. Better yet, have both arms removed, just in case. While, technically, this solves the problem, it demands too high a price. Apparently, this "professional" isn't sufficiently knowledgeable to offer less severe, more appropriate solutions.

"Similar types of 'solutions' are sometimes misapplied to tree care problems," says Peter Gerstenberger, senior advisor for safety & compliance at the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA). Based in Manchester, N.H., the TCIA is the national association for tree care company owners and operators. The practice known as "topping" – the lopping off of large parts of a tree – is the tree care equivalent to amputation.

Some companies call themselves tree surgeons. The ones I know of in this area only know how to amputate. Topping is their specialty "lion's-tailing" is another practice that severely damages trees. In this case the inner foliage, branches, and limbs of a tree are stripped bare. The lion-tailed tree has the unnatural form of a giant umbrella, with the remaining foliage limited to the ends of the branches. The limbs left on the tree are long and bare except for a characteristic "tuft" of foliage at the end, giving the appearance of a lion's tail.

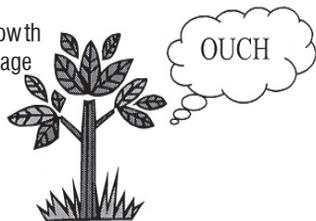
Consumers today are more knowledgeable and increasingly refuse to allow their trees to be topped. Unfortunately, some so-called professionals practice lion's tailing, which isn't as instantly recognized as a bad practice by consumers. Gerstenberger notes that topping should not be confused with proper crown reduction pruning, which will safely reduce a tree's size and redirect its growth. Nor should lion's-tailing be confused with proper thinning, which is the selective removal of branches to decrease weight and wind resistance.

Gerstenberger says you should not top trees because doing so:

- Leaves large exposed wounds that the tree can't readily close
- Ruins tree structure
- Removes too much foliage and disrupts the tree's energy storage for future growth
- Stimulates vigorous new growth, which is weakly attached and prone to breakage
- Increases tree maintenance costs.
- Destroys the tree's appearance and value

You should not lion's tail trees because:

- Limbs become weak and may break
- Increased sunlight on the interior of the tree can cause sunscald
- It stimulates vigorous new growth on the tree that is weakly attached and prone to break
- It removes too much foliage disrupting the tree's energy reserve for future growth
- It destroys the tree's appearance and value.



What is the alternative?

Professional arborists have the ability to make the tree look more attractive, safer and smaller with appropriate corrective pruning. Pruning encourages growth, improves flower and fruit production, improves plant health, repairs damage and helps add aesthetic appeal to a tree.

What can you do?

Homeowners who would like a professional arborist to assess their trees should contact the Tree Care industry Association (TCIA), a 67-year-old public and professional resource on trees and arboriculture. It has more than 2,000 member companies who recognize stringent safety and performance standards, and are required to carry liability insurance. TCIA also has an Accreditation program that assists companies in meeting industry standards and qualifications, as well as helping companies create and maintain safety and technical training programs. An easy way to find a professional tree care service provider in your area is to use TCIA's "Locate a member company" program. You can use this service by calling 1-800-733-2622 or by doing a ZIP code search on the TCIA Web site, www.treecareindustry.org.

Have a very Merry Christmas & Happy New Year!

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