

Storm Protection - Should I Top My Tree?

John Eisenhower, Integrity Tree Service, Inc.

Trees and People

When trees grow taller and spread wider, tree owners begin to worry they might blow over or lose large branches in the next storm. This is a legitimate concern. Thousands of trees end up on the ground or in pieces every monsoon season. The fact is that large trees planted in our urban environments near homes, cars and high pedestrian areas have the potential to cause major property damage or personal injury. The question is: How do we manage these growing landscape assets?

Topping

As trees grow larger, people often attempt to control their size by topping them. But topping is an inappropriate technique to reduce tree size that cuts through a stem more than two years old at an indiscriminate location. This reduction of the height or spread of a tree by cutting branches at predetermined lengths without reference to lateral branches has severe consequences.

Higher Maintenance and Risk

Topping may create a safer tree for a short time, but it will be a much less manageable and potentially more dangerous tree in the future. The reason is that when a branch is topped, several new sprouts emerge over the next growing season from just below the topping cut. This vigorous new growth is weakly attached, crowded, disorganized and tends to grow vertically with minimal lateral branching. In other words, these sprouts are ugly, potentially more hazardous and difficult to prune in the future.

A Foliage Shell

Topping also creates a dense foliage shell that blocks normal sunlight to the tree's interior. As a result, smaller branches inside the tree die back due to lack of sun. Also the tree's live branches become concentrated in the outer third of the tree crown requiring more work to maintain.

More Decay

A final reason topping is bad for a tree is that heading cuts often leave large pruning wounds that are entry points for decay fungi to invade the tree's heartwood. Compartmentalization is a tree's method of wound closure to prevent this spread of decay but topping cuts make this natural process more difficult.

So while topping gives temporary relief to tree owners, it destroys the natural beauty of their trees, increases future maintenance costs and creates a multi-headed monster that is often more hazardous than before it was topped.

For more information on proper methods for crown reduction, see the article titled [The Difference Between Topping and Crown Reduction](#).