

Alternatives to Tree Topping

By Jane Billingham



We are blessed to live in Skagit County, where beautiful conifers and beautiful views are equally plentiful. Unfortunately, sometimes the two do not mix well, and many people chop the tops off their conifers to open up their views. There are many reasons why tree topping is not a good idea. The good news is, there are alternatives.

There are three main reasons not to top your conifers.

First, tree topping leads to ongoing maintenance, which is expensive. Trees grow from the top. When you chop off the top of a conifer, the tree will continue to grow from several points rather than one central leader, and if you want to keep it at a particular height, you will have to continue topping it as it grows.

Second, a topped tree may become diseased. The exposed top may rot. As the rot spreads, branches loosen, becoming a hazard. Also the tree draws nutrients from its upper branches. If too many are removed too often, the tree becomes stressed, and stressed trees are susceptible to root rot, a major cause of tree death in the Pacific Northwest.

Third, tree topping leads to trees with squat, unnatural forms, which many people find unattractive.

So what can you do if you want to save your trees, your dollars, and your view? A branch 30 feet off the ground on a 40 foot tree will still be only 30 feet off the ground when that tree grows to 60 feet. Branches do not move up when trees grow. So, if you remove a branch 30 feet off the ground to create an open space you can see through, that open space will stay where you want it for as long as you have that tree.

There are three different methods you can use to remove branches to preserve views: skirting, interlimbing, and windowing. Unlike tree topping, none require expensive, recurring maintenance, and provided you use approved pruning cuts and do not remove more than 40 percent of the original crown, all are healthy for your trees.

Skirting or limbing up

Use this method when you need to see under or around tall conifers close to your home. Cut all the branches off from the ground up to the desired level. Lower branches contribute less energy to tree growth than upper branches, so the tree can survive the removal of a number of these branches without ill effects. For an aesthetically pleasing shape, don't limb up higher than half the visible height of the tree. If the limbed-up tree looks top heavy, thin out some of the remaining upper branches.

Interlimbing or thinning

Use this method if your conifers are farther away and you like the idea of seeing your view through a tracery of green. Remove selected branches up the length of the trunk to allow partial views through the tree. Interlimbing will also allow more light into your yard if your tree blocks sunlight, and it will make your tree better able to withstand strong winds because it presents less mass for the wind to push against.

Windowing

Use this method for large, dense conifers smack in the middle of your view. Proceed as for interlimbing except that instead of removing selected branches up the length of the trunk, remove multiple branches from a specific area around or on one side of the trunk. Remove branches until you have a clear view through the tree, with the remaining branches acting as a frame above, below, and to the side of your view. Windowing can be done symmetrically around the tree or in more than one place up the trunk to open views and create a pleasing silhouette.

Unless you are experienced, it is best to leave large-tree pruning to professionals with the right tree-pruning and safety equipment—just avoid any tree pruners who suggest that topping is your only option. Local arborists certified by the International Society of Arboriculture can be found by visiting their Web site at www.isa-arbor.com.



An example of two tree windows in Anacortes. Photo by Jane Billingham.

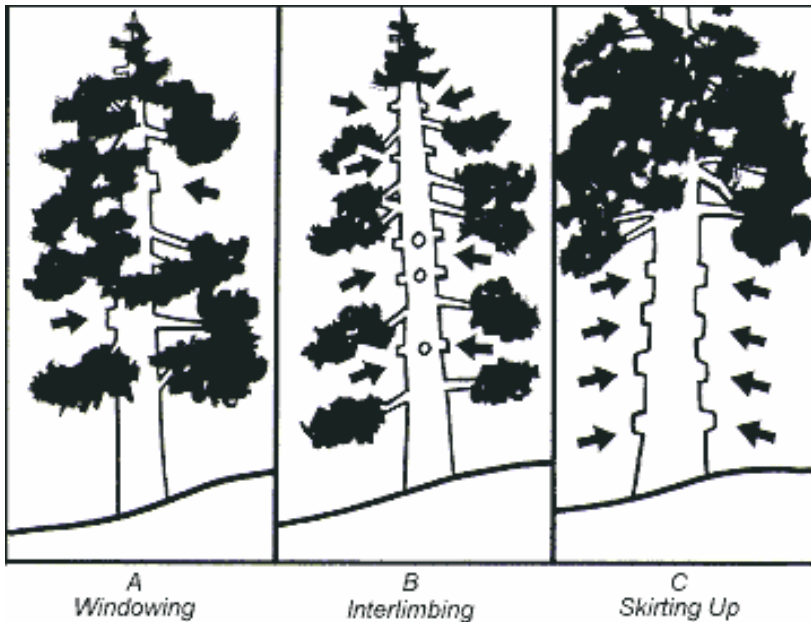


Illustration 12:
Alternative Pruning Practices: Conifers

This drawing illustrates three alternatives to topping conifers: windowing, interlimbing, and skirting up. Graphic courtesy of Washington State Department of Ecology.

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