

# Tree Topping

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## The Trouble with Tree Topping

According to the International Society of Arboriculture, “Topping is perhaps the most harmful tree pruning practice known.” Kevin Zobrist of WSU Extension writes, “...topping is so effective at killing trees that it is a common method for artificially creating snags.” Yet despite these warnings, tree topping remains common here in the Pacific Northwest. Why is this and what alternatives do we have?

Tree topping is usually done to improve a view or to stop trees growing into power lines. Views and power lines are saved at the expense of stubby, unattractive trees. But the main concerns with tree topping are not aesthetics, but tree health, public safety, and costs to the homeowner.

## Reasons Not to Top

Proper pruning improves the growth habit, health, and beauty of a tree. Topping, the indiscriminate cutting of tree branches to stubs or lateral branches that are not large enough to assume the terminal role, does none of these things.

When topped, deciduous trees grow sprouts, and conifers grow competing leaders. This weak new growth may get tall enough to impede the view or tangle in power lines. Cass Turnbull of Plant Amnesty states that a topped deciduous tree will return to near its original size in a few years. Not only that, but weak new growth may break off in high winds causing damage to surrounding property. Therefore, topped trees often need expensive maintenance to keep new growth in check.

Topped trees are likely to become diseased. First, exposed cuts at the tops of trees are highly susceptible to rot. As the rot spreads, branches loosen, becoming a hazard. Second, trees that lose their upper canopy may experience sunburn, which leads to cankers, bark splitting, and the death of some limbs. Third, trees draw nutrients from their upper branches. If too many are removed too often, trees become stressed, and stressed trees are susceptible to insect infestations and to root rot. By topping a tree, you may be condemning it to a long, lingering death.

Consider also that topped trees can never regain their original graceful forms, and disfigured trees may adversely impact property values. The International Society of Arboriculture estimates that healthy, well-maintained trees can increase a property’s values by 10 to 20 percent, while topped trees are considered an “impending expense.”



**Left:** Little more than a stump is left after severe topping. **Right:** A topped curly willow that is now more susceptible to rot and disease. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

### **Alternatives to Topping**

**Crown reduction:** can reduce the height of trees with a rounded shape. The upper branches are cut back to laterals that are at least one-third the diameter of the limbs being removed and large enough to outgrow lateral branches directly below. “Topping—Tree Care or Tree Abuse” (see References) explains this procedure and includes a sketch of how to do it. Crown reduction does not work, however, for trees with a pyramidal shape, such as conifers. For conifers, you can consider skirting, thinning, and windowing.

**Skirting or limbing-up:** cut off all the branches 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.

**Thinning or interlimbing:** remove selected branches to allow partial views through the tree. This may also allow more sunlight into your yard.

**Windowing:** remove all the branches from a specific area of the trunk to frame a view with branches above and below.

Skirting, thinning, and windowing work because trees grow from the top, so the areas you clear will always be at the same height. These techniques are illustrated in “Managing Vegetation on Coastal Slopes” (see References).

There are times when it is better just to replace the offending tree. If you find yourself in this situation, WSU Extension Bulletin EB2036 “Small Trees for the Home Landscape” gives suggestions for trees that will not outgrow their welcome our area.

### **A Word of Caution**

Unless you are experienced, leave large-tree pruning to professionals with the right training and equipment. Local arborists certified by the International Society of Arboriculture can be found by visiting [www.treesaregood.com](http://www.treesaregood.com). Avoid tree-pruning services that insist tree topping is your only option. They may just be guaranteeing themselves work in the future.

### **REFERENCES:**

- Linda Chalker-Scott, “The Myth of Tree Topping”  
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<https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu/small-trees-for-the-home-landscape-home-garden-series>
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<https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/documents/9331.pdf>
- International Society of Arboriculture, “Why Topping Hurts Trees”  
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- Iowa State University Extension, “Topping—Tree Care or Tree Abuse”  
<https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/Topping-Tree-Care-or-Tree-Abuse-Sustainable-Urban-Landscapes>
- Cass Turnbull, “5 Reasons to Stop Topping Trees” <https://treeworknow.com/pdf/5-reasons-to-stop-topping.pdf>
- WSU Extension “Tree Topping: A Practice to Avoid”  
<https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu/tree-topping-a-practice-to-avoid>

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.