

# Topping trees is dangerous, unnecessary

**Q**uestion: Several of our trees need topping but my neighbor says it's not good for the trees but cannot tell me why. Is she right? If yes, why?

**Answer:** Thank you for your wonderful question. First, let us define "topping the tree" so that we are clear on topping versus pruning. Topping is an indiscriminate chopping off of the top of the tree and includes branches and the leader of a tree. Pruning is neatly cutting off above an outward growing lateral branch. Each does very different things to the tree.

The way I think of it is that each cut sends a message to your tree. If you are pruning correctly, you direct your tree to make the right kind of growth, potential fruit production, or size. Topping, however, tells it the opposite.

For instance, when you top your tree you are removing a good portion of the top of the tree

branches and taking a lot of leaves with it. Since the leaves are where the food for the tree

is manufactured, topping can put your tree into starvation mode. If that happens, your tree will then go into survival mode and activate dormant buds, forcing multiple shoots to grow below each cut you have made. What you then have is six or more shoots growing where there was only one shoot before. Correctly removing the branch will cause only one or two shoots to grow back – and at a slower rate.

While I know the reason you want to top your trees is to control the height or width, it should be done by pruning, not topping.

Also, since topping the tree is basically cutting it in the wrong place, the tree lacks the defense mechanism to close and



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repair the wound. Open wounds encourage disease and insect infestations.

So, when

you top a tree you are compounding the original problem and adding several new ones. Other effects of "topping" include making the tree ugly and subjecting it to the dangers of decay, sunburn (from losing too many leaves), and stress.

If I haven't yet convinced you that you should never, never, top a tree, there is another thing to consider: Topping is expensive. Now, I don't mean the initial act of you or your husband out on a Saturday morning whacking on your tree. I mean in the months and years following the "topping".

If your tree dies, there is the cost of removing it. If your tree survives it may require corrective measures to repair the damage.



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**Radical pruning often will kill a tree. It is better to remove the old trees and plant a smaller species in the same area.**

Beautiful trees and landscaping increase property values. When buyers see a dead or unsightly tree they see an upcoming expense for them to remove or replace it.

Consider the liability potential if your tree falls. Since topping is considered an

unacceptable tree maintenance you could be considered negligent (in a lawsuit) if your tree or branches from it causes property damage or bodily harm to someone.

So, when do we top trees? Never.

Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail,

call, or visit the Douglas County Master, Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-236-3052, or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.