

## Tree topping is common but not wise

Winter is a good time to prune trees, but tree topping is a detrimental practice that damages both the health and value of landscape trees. Tree topping – the indiscriminate cutting back of tree branches to stubs – weakens trees, leaves trees vulnerable to insects and disease and shortens the life span of trees.

Although tree topping is an unwise practice, many people mistakenly “top” trees because they grow into utility wires, interfere with views or sunlight, or simply grow so large that they worry the landowner.

The Oregon Department of Forestry’s urban forestry staff offers the following information on why topping hurts trees, and where to get information on proper pruning techniques:

- Topping starves and shocks trees. It removes much of the tree’s protective “crown” of leaves and branches. Without its “crown,” a tree cannot feed itself or protect its sensitive bark from damaging sun and heat. The result is the splitting of the bark and the death of branches.

- Topping is expensive. Each time a branch is cut, numerous long, skinny young shoots (called suckers or watersprouts) grow rapidly back to replace it. A topped tree must be done and re-done every few years and, eventually, must be removed when it dies or the owner gives up. A properly pruned tree stays “done” longer, since the work does not

stimulate an upsurge of re-growth. Proper pruning actually improves the health and beauty of a tree, costing you less in the long run.

- Topping reduces the appraised value of your tree. A tree, like any landscape amenity, adds to the value of your property. Appraisers subtract hundreds of dollars from the value of a tree when it’s been topped (using the International Society of Arboriculture’s guidelines for evaluation).

And, not only do topped trees reduce property values; they also eventually increase liability because of safety issues. In many cities, topping is banned because of the public safety factor and the potential for lawsuits. You can even sue a tree company for wrongfully topping a tree.

- Topping is ugly. A tree’s natural form is the source of its beauty, a function of uninterrupted taper. Topped trees appear disfigured and mutilated. Arborists consider the topping of some trees a criminal act, since a tree’s 90-year achievement of natural beauty can be destroyed in a couple of hours. And, the freshly sawed look is just the beginning of the eyesore. The worst is yet to come, as the tree re-grows a witch’s broom of ugly, straight suckers and sprouts. Sadly, once topped, a tree will never return to its natural shape.

Paul Ries, urban forester for the Oregon Department of Forestry, hopes people can

learn to recognize and appreciate the advantages of proper tree pruning and give up the practice of tree topping.

“Proper pruning can remove excessive growth without the problems topping creates,” said Ries. “Topping creates hazard trees, but proper tree pruning creates healthy trees.” If the trees on your property are in need of pruning but you’re unsure just how to go about it, contact a certified arborist in your area for assistance.

For more information on proper tree care, the popular publication *An Oregon Homeowner’s Guide to Tree Care* may be downloaded from the Oregon Department of Forestry’s website: <[www.oregon.gov/ODF/URBAN\\_FORESTS/ucf\\_publications.shtml](http://www.oregon.gov/ODF/URBAN_FORESTS/ucf_publications.shtml)>.

## Things to think about when choosing trees

Trees improve any landscape. They can make an aesthetic statement, provide wildlife benefits and buffer the house from environmental extremes of heat and wind.



What should be considered when choosing a tree?

Will the tree fit the lot? Think here about mature height and width of the tree. Western Oregon is a temperate rain forest. Trees grow well here. In fact, when you look at descriptions in books or catalogs about ultimate tree height and width, you are safe taking the highest

## Master Gardener classes start soon

Home gardeners in Columbia County with a thirst for more gardening knowledge, and a willingness to pass that knowledge on to others, can still join the Oregon State University Extension Service Master Gardener program.

The Master Gardener program is designed to teach volunteers how to make better use of their gardening resources and abilities. They, in turn, teach others. Volunteers are given training in soil management, vegetable gardening techniques, landscape maintenance, pest control, and many other aspects of gardening. Then during the gardening season, these new Master Gardeners help to teach others to do a better job of growing and caring for plants, fighting off pests, and making our commu-

nities a better place to live.

Classes will be held once a week, on Mondays from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., for ten consecutive weeks in St. Helens. The first class will be on, January 9. There is a fee of \$50 for reference materials.

For more information about the program and how to enroll, call the Columbia County Extension office, located at 505 N. Columbia River Hwy. in St. Helens or call 503-397-3462.



number in the range for planning purposes. Many homeowners purchase trees only to remove them in 15-20 years, when they outgrow their space. Don’t crowd trees or try to manage them by constrictive pruning.

Will the tree perform well on your site? There are a lot of elements in play here. Is the site in full sun, partial sun or fairly deep shade? Each tree species has an environmental niche where it will grow best. What about soil conditions: A lot of new construction sites have poorly drained clay soils on which the house is built. The list of trees that do well in those soils is quite limited. Sometimes the drainage in clay can be improved to allow a slightly wider choice of plant material. Topsoil may need to be brought in to create planting “pockets.” Know the soils where you live and choose trees adapted to

those soils.

Is the tree cold-hardy? This is what the hardiness zones are all about. In general, most trees sold here are more than hardy enough for our winters. We get into trouble sometimes trying to stretch the limits and put zone 9 plants into our landscapes. Our rare severe cold events usually thin those plants out. If you live in a “cold pocket,” err on the side of more hardiness.

Is the tree disease or insect prone? Blue spruce gets several insects and diseases that disfigure the tree. Some flowering cherries are hard hit by diseases. Junipers on clay die after 15-20 years (if not sooner). Some, not all, crab apples and dogwoods are disease prone. All this is to say that there are choices to be made and the wise consumer will do some research on species and varieties that are more care-free.

Some trees may have poisonous fruit or foliage. Is that a concern for children or livestock where you live? Fence line plantings need to be researched for livestock safety.

Finally, is the tree invasive? Is it likely to throw root sprouts all over the lawn or spread seeds that will take root and grow?

For more information, check the OSU Horticulture Department Ornamental tree and shrub web site <<http://oregon-state.edu/dept/lplants>>.



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