

CDF NEWS RELEASE

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection



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**RELEASE
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TREE TOPPING – A BAD DIRECTION FOR HEALTHY TREES

Riverside – In this era of environmental awareness and concern, it is surprising to see that trees in our communities and gracing our home fronts are still subjected to the dangerous practice of topping. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) urges you to avoid this outlandish practice of topping trees as a way to reduce or control the growth of a tree.

What is topping you may ask. Topping is the removal of main tree branches to stubs in either a straight across hedge type fashion or a complete delimiting of the tree leaving only the main trunk of the tree. Topping or heading is generally intended to reduce the size of the tree. Some of the reasons trees are topped include the theory that the trees will grow better, growth of foliage into utility lines, interference with solar collectors or blocking a scenic view.



You can always tell after a tree has been topped. The tree looks like an ugly stub, a hat rack some would say, and just a remnant of a once lovely tree.

The over pruning is then followed by a rapid growth of tree limb sprouts, if the tree re-sprouts at all. This will eventually lead to a tree that is bushier and just as tall as when it was topped. However, unlike the original tree prior to topping, the new growth of the topped tree is dangerous because the new branches are not attached as strongly to the tree as were the original limbs and branches. You will end up with a tree more susceptible to disease and insect problems. It is important to understand that every tree variety has within its genes, growth instructions, a fixed plan for tree height and crown spread. All trees will attempt to grow to their mature form pattern. When trees are topped, they will attempt to regain their natural form pattern of height and crown spread.

The CDF and the National Arbor Day Foundation has eight good reasons on why you shouldn't top a tree.

- 1. Starvation:** Good pruning practices rarely remove more than $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ of the tree's crown, which in turn does not seriously interfere with the tree's leafy crown to manufacture food. Topping removes so much of the crown that it upsets an older tree's well-developed crown-to-root ratio and temporarily cuts off its food-making ability.
- 2. Shock:** A tree's crown is like an umbrella that shields much of the tree from the direct rays of the sun. By suddenly removing this protection, the remaining bark tissue is so exposed that scalding may result. There may also be a dramatic effect on neighboring trees and shrubs. If these thrive in shade and the shade is removed, poor health or death may result.
- 3. Insect and Disease:** The large stubs of a topped tree have a difficult time forming callus tissue. The terminal location of these cuts, as well as their large diameter, prevent the tree's chemically based natural defense system from doing its job. The stubs are highly vulnerable to insect invasion and the spores of decaying fungi. If decay is already present in the limbs, opening the limb will speed the spread of the disease.
- 4. Weak Limbs:** At best, the wood of a new limb that sprouts after a larger limb has had its top cut off is more weakly attached than a limb that develops normally. If rot exists or develops at the severed end of the limb, the weight of the sprout makes a bad situation even worse.
- 5. Rapid New Growth:** The goal of topping is usually to control the height and spread of a tree. Actually, it has just the opposite effect. The resulting sprouts (often called water sprouts) are far more numerous than normal new growth and they elongate so rapidly that the tree returns to its

original height in a very short time – and with a far more dense and dangerous re-growth pattern.

6. Tree Death: Some species of trees are less tolerant to topping than others. Beeches, for example, do not sprout readily after severe pruning and the reduced foliage many times leads to the death of the tree. This type of response is also very typical of many conifers, leading to death from insect attacks. Mulberry trees on the other hand are specimens, which can withstand heavy topping. Some mulberries are topped annually by their owners. However, many tree varieties cannot recover from severe topping practices.

7. Ugliness: A topped tree is a disfigured tree. Even with its regrowth it never regains the grace and character of its species. The landscape and the community are robbed of a valuable asset.

8. Cost: To a worker with a saw, topping a tree is much easier than applying the skill and judgment needed for a good pruning. Therefore, topping may cost less in the short run. However, the true costs of topping are hidden. These include: reduced property value, the expense of removal and replacement if the tree dies, the loss of other trees and shrubs if they succumb to changed light conditions, the risk of liability from weakened branches, and increased future maintenance. For many, the real cost may come in the future payouts associated with court actions associated with life and property damage due to improper pruning practice not accepted within the scope of proper pruning.

But is there another way to reduce a tree's growth? Yes there is. The alternative is proper pruning or trimming. This type of operation takes longer and can cost a bit more, but it leaves the tree in good shape. Proper trimming or pruning instead of just cutting of branches will keep your tree healthier and better looking along with helping the tree live as long a life as possible.

For more information on proper tree maintenance, drop CDF a letter of request at 2524 Mulberry Street, Riverside, CA 92501 to request Tree City bulletins # 1, 6 and 8

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