

Topping: An Old Practice Is Killing Missouri Trees

It happens in the fall, after the last leaves have dropped and been raked. It happens in late winter, before trees start to bud. And it happens when a sudden ice storm hits. Missouri trees get topped. And that's not good.

“No matter how you reason it, topping — the severe cutting of tree limbs, usually from the top down — is bad for trees,” says Gene Brunk, Chairman of a steering committee directing a statewide public service informational campaign aimed at stopping this destructive practice. Even though many people have come to accept tree topping as a needed practice, Brunk points out that numerous long-term research studies and many years of practical observations by foresters, arborists, horticulturists, and other tree care professionals have shown beyond any reasonable doubt that the long-term damage done to trees is severe. “No good comes from it. And it eventually kills a tree that someone really cared about in the first place,” Brunk says.

The Missouri Community Forestry Council and Forest ReLeaf of Missouri are leading a campaign to end this destructive practice of needlessly topping trees in Missouri. The campaign, dubbed “Experts Agree: Don't Top Your Tree,” is supported by the Missouri Department of Conservation, the USDA Forest Service, the Society of American Foresters, and the Midwest Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture.

“Tree topping is one of those myths that someone thought was good for trees. In fact, topping permanently destroys a tree's natural beauty and exposes it to disease and decay, often causing early death. A topped tree will ultimately cost more to maintain than a properly pruned tree,” according to Brunk.

Topping is so widely practiced that many homeowners accept it as “the right thing to do” when they perceive a need to prune trees or reduce homeowner liability. Topping looks like a bad haircut — and it is. It is prevalent throughout Missouri — urban, suburban and rural. Most of the time topping is done to make trees smaller — to confine them to yards. One of the most predictable times to see topping appear is after a severe storm. A homeowner may be worried that limbs will fall and make them vulnerable to lawsuits. So they allow the first opportunist who comes along with a chainsaw to cut back trees. The concern is well founded; the approach totally wrong.

Evidence and experience shows that topping actually makes trees weaker and more hazardous. It opens trees to an invasion of rotting organisms. It starves trees by inhibiting their ability to utilize their food and water sources. And the resulting new growth produces limbs that are more likely to break in a subsequent storm. Each time a branch is cut, numerous long skinny young shoots (called suckers or water sprouts) grow rapidly back as replacements. The tree’s natural beauty is gone and can never be replaced.

Every homeowner should know the value of good trees, from producing shade and reducing utility bills to providing a habitat for birds and small animals. They should also know an ugly tree can severely reduce their property value, according to the steering committee.

There are alternatives to topping trees. The single most important thing to do is **Plant The Right Tree In The Right Place** to begin with. Experts agree that this simple practice will avoid 9 out of the 10 most common problems associated with future topping of a tree; **because right trees planted in the right place never need to be topped!** There are numerous books or guides, many free and available to the public, that provide information to help homeowners make good choices.

Experts point out that homeowners should really think through their decisions before planting a tree. For example, a really fast-growing tree may be the poorest choice because

these species are usually more susceptible to damage from winds and other storms. Proximity to buildings, power lines and even neighbors, soil type, water availability and terrain all must be considered, before selecting a tree(s) to plant.

In general, species native to the state, and particularly to the region where they are to be planted, will survive and grow better than non-native species. In certain situations, however, even non-natives may be used if there are no suitable native plants available. No matter if the tree is a native or non-native species, the chances of survival rest entirely with where it is planted and how it is cared for. Information is available from Conservation Department foresters, The Missouri Community Forestry Council regions, certified arborists, the University of Missouri Extension Horticulturist and Forester, and others. Most of the sources provide region specific recommendations concerning species selection for almost any landowner's individual situation.

Proper care and pruning of existing trees also is important. Guidelines for pruning and care are also available from the various sources listed above. If one is unsure about proper pruning techniques, he/she can make sure their trees are properly pruned by hiring only professional arborists to do the work

“With the right selection, the right location, and proper care during their lifetime, trees will increase property value, reduce heating and air-conditioning bills, and provide natural habitat for birds and small animals” Brunk says.

“A beautiful, shade-providing, environmentally beneficial tree can grace our state for a century or longer, if treated properly. It all starts with planting the Right Tree In The Right Place.”

For more information on the “Experts Agree: Don’t Top Your Tree” campaign, Missouri residents should call 1-877-40-NoTop (1-877-406-6867).