

NOTE TO EDITORS: This commentary was written by Lisa Allen, State Forester, Missouri Department of Conservation, and Gene Brunk, Missouri Community Forestry Council

“Tree Topping”: Senseless, Obsolete And Still Occurring In Missouri

We Missourians tend to take our trees for granted, much to the envy of those in the bordering states of Kansas, Iowa, Oklahoma and Illinois.

We have so many trees — a forest of green in the spring and summer; a blanket of warm reds and brilliant yellows in the fall — that we hardly blink when an archaic tree-mutilating practice takes place. It’s called “topping” and it’s prevalent throughout the state. It is evident in urban settings, established neighborhoods, in the midst of suburban sprawl and in rural and agricultural settings. And people need to know better.

“Topping” is the drastic removal or cutting back of large branches in mature trees. The tree is pruned or sheared much the way a hedge is cut, leaving large exposed stubs. The practice is also known as heading, stubbing, tipping, lopping, roundover, dehorning or hatracking. Regardless of what it’s called, topping is ugly, expensive and dangerous.

Alex Shigo, a foremost expert in tree physiology, argues that the practice has gotten so bad that local governments should consider laws against topping. In fact, some states and local municipalities already have.

“Topping is a major starting point for hazard trees,” Shigo says. “Malpractice suits may be in the near future for people who continue to top trees... We must push hard to let people know that if it must be topped, then it would be better to remove the tree and start over again with a new tree.”

Just how bad is topping in Missouri? Talk to Missouri’s tree experts, including arborists certified by the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA),

— m o r e —

Page 2 — ‘Tree Topping’: Senseless, Obsolete and Still Occurring In Missouri

the only recognized, industry-wide testing group for professionals in tree care. They will tell you that “topping” is so widely practiced that it is accepted by homeowners as “the right thing to do” when you need to make trees “smaller” or reduce homeowner liability.

Ironically, tree topping does just the opposite of what people think it will do. The severe, harsh cutting only makes the tree grow back faster in the form of ugly sprouts or shoots, which are much weaker and more susceptible to disease, insects and rot.

Weakened trees are much more likely to fall during storms — or at any other time — and thus become very hazardous.

So, where did the habit start in the first place? There are many theories. What has happened over time, however, is that topping has been practiced so frequently that it seems normal. Because Missouri is blessed with so many trees, numerous people have found seasonal work in providing mulch, firewood and in the pruning and maintenance of established trees. When a freak ice storm devastates a community, or a rash of spring storms leaves neighborhoods splattered with broken limbs and fallen trees, a whole new crop of chainsaw wielders appear — usually with little or no understanding of how trees should be properly pruned. The more to cut, the quicker the job, the bigger the payday.

Buyers should always beware of these people. But even established firms have to be questioned. Just check the telephone directories and see how many tree services advertise that they “top.” Topping is a quick way to make a buck.

Some people also want to point a finger at utility companies as the culprits. Today, most utility companies in Missouri are involved in the campaign to end topping wherever they can. More importantly they are eager to help consumers pick the right tree for the right spot — and how to prune it properly — near or under power lines.

So, how do we begin to tackle this problem? The answer lies in public education. The right tree planted in the right place in our state can provide us shade, a sanctuary for birds and small animals, keep our air cleaner and reduce energy needs. Hopefully a more informed public, and a little common sense, will quash the topping myth before uninformed people with chainsaws kill off more of our cherished trees.