

Topping Trees is a Very Poor Practice
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Topping a tree is one of the worst pruning practice that can be done. Topping is drastically shortening all of a trees branches without regard to where the pruning cut is made.

Unfortunately, I saw another tree in Columbus that was recently topped. That means it's time for another article on why trees should not be topped.

Topped trees can become hazards, not to mention the aesthetics of the tree is destroyed. Once topped, these trees are no longer an asset to the property or the community.

Topping is harmful because all of the cuts are stub cuts. The cut is made at a point on the branch where the tree cannot seal the wound with chemical defenses or wound wood and decay sets into the remaining branch stubs.

The drastic removal of so much live tissue triggers the tree to produce many suckers or water sprouts. These are weakly attached to branches because they grow from latent buds that are just beneath the bark. Suckers can grow to become quite large and heavy.

The property owner ends up with a tree that eventually has large suckers weakly attached to a stub branch that has decay setting in.

This is high risk tree at any time, but especially in wind or ice storms; not to mention an ugly tree. Do not top trees and think twice about hiring a tree care service that will top a tree as part of their practice.

Another thought that struck me with this recently topped tree is we do not recommend pruning trees during stress periods like drought. If a tree needs to be pruned while stressed, minimal pruning should be done.

Trees, even those in irrigated lawns, are drought stressed due to our current conditions. Most lawn irrigation systems do not moisten the soil deeply enough and trees are stressed in years like this.

To effectively water trees, an irrigation that moistens the soil six to eight inches deep would be needed for trees. Doing this about once a month is recommended for established trees during drought years.

The reason to avoid pruning during stress years is because trees are less able to react to wounds with natural chemical defenses. This is what seals wounds to prevent decay from spreading. Pruning during stress periods increases the risk of decay, even in branches pruned correctly.

Pruning paints or wound dressings will not prevent decay. Research shows these products can increase decay in a pruning cut and their use is not recommended.

The best way to reduce decay is to not prune trees during stress periods, make correct pruning cuts, prune branches when they are smaller (2 to 4 inches in diameter) and do not use wound dressings.

A correct pruning cut is one made where a branch attaches to another branch or the trunk. At this point, there is a branch bark ridge and a branch collar. Make the pruning cut just outside the ridge and collar so it remains attached, but do not leave a stub beyond the ridge and collar. Do an internet search for branch bark ridge and branch collar to find images that help identify these.

If you have a large tree, consider hiring a reputable tree care service to safely and correctly prune a tree. But you might want to wait until next year when hopefully we have less drought.