

For Immediate Use



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## ***Experts Agree: Don't Top Your Tree***

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Virginia is blessed with many trees—a forest of green in the spring and summer; a blanket of warm reds and brilliant yellows in the fall. We, in fact, have so many trees that unfortunately we hardly blink when an archaic tree mutilating practice takes place.

### **What is tree topping?**

An inappropriate tree cut-back such as **topping** should not be confused with proper pruning. Careful selective pruning retains a tree's natural shape and beauty. On the other hand, topped trees are easy to spot – the tree's natural shape has been destroyed, while a properly pruned tree looks as if no work has been done at all. With proper pruning, an arborist spends most of the time carefully selecting and removing branches.

Topping is a procedure that drastically removes or cuts back 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, or hat racking. Regardless of what it's called, topping is ugly, expensive and dangerous.

Homeowners often consider topping an acceptable practice and "the right thing to do" when they need to make trees smaller or reduce homeowner liability. Ironically, tree topping does just the opposite. The severe, harsh cutting only makes the tree grow back faster in the form of ugly sprouts, which are much weaker and more susceptible to disease, insects and rot. Weakened trees are much more likely to fall during storms and thus become very hazardous. If a tree needs to be topped it is already a hazard and should be removed and a new tree planted in its place.

Topping can cost long term, too. Rarely, if ever, is it a one-time expense. Because of the fast re-growth, many trees are topped every few years. While healthy trees increase property values by upwards of 20 percent, topped trees decrease real estate values by 20-100 percent! Another factor is topped trees can become a liability. An unhealthy tree, full of disease and decay is an accident waiting to happen; potentially costing thousands and millions of dollars in property damage or bodily injury.

Consumers should beware of people who suggest they 'top' a tree. Numerous people have found seasonal work in providing mulch, firewood and in the pruning and maintenance of established trees. When a severe storm devastates a community, or a rash of spring storms leaves a neighborhood splattered with broken limbs and fallen trees, the chainsaw wielders appear, often with little or no understanding of how trees should be pruned properly.

"Topping is a quick way to make a buck," said Adam Downing, President of the Virginia Urban Forest Council (Trees Virginia). Some people say utility companies also are culprits. However, most companies are eager to help consumers pick the right tree for the right spot and instruct them on how to prune it properly under power lines. Dominion Power has a list of suggested plants for right-of-way plantings at <http://www.dom.com/about/safety/tree.jsp>. Dr. Bonnie Appleton, Virginia Tech Extension Service, has also developed a great publication, "Trees and Shrubs for Overhead Utility Easements," which can be found online at <http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/trees/430-029/430-029.html>.

Every species of tree has different height, width and spacing needs in order to grow into a healthy mature tree. Carefully matching tree selection with site conditions – proximity to other trees, buildings or above-ground utilities – can prevent problems before they occur and will eliminate the need to take harmful, drastic measures. Many utility companies and forestry agencies provide guidelines for planting trees and recommendations of tree species to fit your needs.

Lin Diacont, President of the Virginia Green Industry Council, says "You have the ability – and the responsibility – to prevent future problems by applying the practice of the right tree in the right place." With the right selection, proper annual trimming, adequate water and mulching, these suggested trees will increase property value, reduce heating and air-conditioning costs and provide a natural habitat for birds and small animals. Trees are a long-term investment.

As Virginians, we are blessed to have plentiful trees that provide us with beauty, shade, a sanctuary for birds and small animals, and keep our air cleaner and reduce energy needs. And, as consumers, we have the power to squash the topping practice before more uninformed people with chainsaws kill off our cherished trees. For additional information on "Experts Agree: Don't Top Trees," call 1-866-VATREES or visit [www.TreesVirginia.org](http://www.TreesVirginia.org) Trees Virginia, also known as the Virginia Urban Forest Council, is a non-profit organizations dedicated to stewardship of the Commonwealth's urban and community trees.

Together – whether consumer or Industry professional – let's count instead of murder our blessings, Virginia's trees.

The Go Green column is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

**About the Author:** Jeff Miller, founder of Horticulture Management Associates LLC, serves as the Executive Director for the VA Green Industry Council, [www.viriniagardening.com](http://www.viriniagardening.com). Contributing a diverse background of nursery, greenhouse and landscape experience, Miller challenges all to 'GoGreen'. Contact him at 540-382-0943 or email [info@VirginiaGreen.org](mailto:info@VirginiaGreen.org) . Together, let's 'GoGreen'!

**Sidebars:**

## **Tree Topping Myths**

**People top trees for many reasons, all of them connected to falsehoods and misconceptions.**

**Myth:** Topping a tree will reduce storm damage and make the tree easier to maintain.

**Truth:** Topped trees can regain their original height in as fast as 2 years. The fast growing, extremely long and loosely attached shoots caused by topping may be more susceptible to breakage and storm damage. Ultimately, a topped tree requires more attention in the future than a properly pruned tree.

**Myth:** Topping invigorates a tree.

**Truth:** Topping immediately injures a tree and starts it on a downward spiral. Topping wounds expose the tree to decay and invasion from insects and disease. Also, the loss of foliage starves the tree, which weakens the roots, reducing the tree's structural strength. While a tree may survive topping, its life span will be significantly reduced.

**Myth:** Topped trees will add value to your property.

**Truth:** Topped trees lack natural beauty and may reduce your property values. Also, a topped tree can become hazardous and cause property damage, making it a liability.

## **There is a Better Way: Alternatives to Topping**

As a homeowner, you must educate yourself and make wise choices to protect your home and property – including your trees. A tree is a valuable asset. As a long-term investment, trees require careful decisions and the occasional advice and service of a professional. Here's what you can do to protect your trees:

- Hire only competent, insured and certified tree care professionals.
- When seeking a tree service, check the company's topping policy. If they say top, don't let them near your trees.
- Find out if the individual or company carries professional certification, particularly through the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA). The ISA conducts extensive courses and certifies those who pass an industry-based exam.
- Most importantly, never let yourself be pressured by bargains. The old saying, "you get what you pay for"

truly applies here.

## Information Resources

For more information about caring for your trees, and more detail about proper tree pruning and tree selection, contact the organizations below:

Virginia Urban Forest Council, 1-866-TREESVA, [www.TreesVirginia.org](http://www.TreesVirginia.org)

Mid-Atlantic Chapter-International Society of Arboriculture (MAC-ISA), (703)753.0499, <http://www.mac-isa.org/>

International Society of Arboriculture (ISA), 217-355-9411, [www.isa-arbor.com](http://www.isa-arbor.com)

Tree Care Industry Association, 603-314-5380, [www.natlarb.com](http://www.natlarb.com)

National Arbor Day Foundation, 402-474-5655, [www.arborday.org](http://www.arborday.org)

Virginia Cooperative Extension, <http://www.ext.vt.edu/resources/> click on Commercial, Greenhouse, Nursery & Landscape button, then click on “Trees for Special Situations”

*Background information for this article was provided by Trees Virginia, the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service,, the Virginia Nursery & Landscape Association and Jeff Miller, Virginia Certified Horticulturist and Executive Director of the Virginia Green Industry Council.*

*The Virginia Green Industry Council is the voice of the horticulture industry in the Commonwealth and is dedicated to enhancing the beauty of the state’s environment, the well-being of our citizens, improving our state’s economy, and improving the health and wellness for everyone in Virginia. The Council is made up of providers and consumers of horticultural products and services. The Council works to provide public and industry education, environmental guidelines and other information that will keep Virginia green and growing. For more information, visit [www.viriniagreen.org](http://www.viriniagreen.org); 540-382-0943; FAX: 540-382-2716; E-mail: [info@viriniagreen.org](mailto:info@viriniagreen.org)*

**Editors Note: Contact the VGIC Office for high resolutions versions these photos included below.**

540-382-0943, [info@VirginiaGreen.org](mailto:info@VirginiaGreen.org)



Caption: Trees die from a lot of natural causes. Don't be one of them.



Caption: The only thing tree topping reduces is your property value.



Caption: Think of it as a really, really bad haircut...which could kill you.