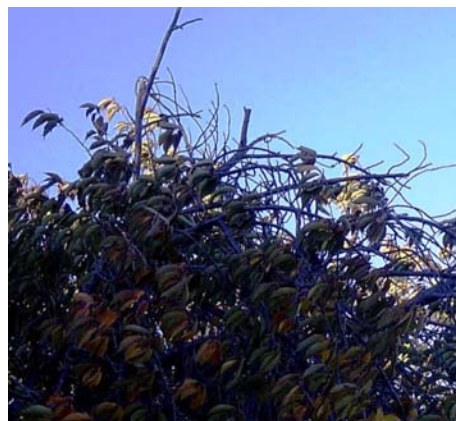


Don't Top Trees!

Tree topping is a bad, costly practice. There are better ways to keep our trees down to size.

Newport's Tree and Parks Supervisor, Scott Wheeler, is a very good-natured person. But if you want to get his dander up, just clobber your trees by lopping off the main branches at the top and leaving stubs, in an ill-advised effort to downsize them. Topping has been common here and in some other countries. But to Scott and other modern-day arborists who really understand tree growth, it's like an unneeded amputation. Here's why....



Five reasons to avoid topping

1. Topping stresses the trees. Some may die.

It starves and weakens a tree by removing lots of leaves. The bark tissues that are newly exposed can get "sunburn," and this can lead to cankers, splitting and death of some branches. Also, topping produces large wounds that are prone to insect and disease attack.

2. Topping doesn't keep trees small.

A tree reacts to topping by sending up many quick-growing shoots (sprouts) in a desperate effort to replace leaves and branches. If the tree survives, it won't slow down until it regains its original size. You still have the problem of how to reduce size.

3. The new shoots are likely to become dangerous.

The shoots that sprout up are only weakly attached to the tree. There are so many that they form a thicket, like the sail of a ship. So they easily break off in wind and ice storms. The whole tree is more likely to be blown down than a tree that has been pruned and thinned properly. In a city like Newport that is densely settled and can have hurricanes, topping brings higher odds of trees falling on buildings and streets.

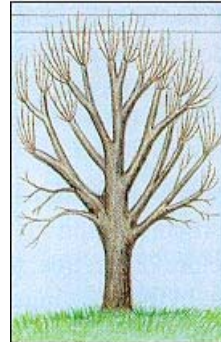
Moreover, topping often leaves long stubs that don't heal well. The outside may look all right, but the wood inside the remaining branches and even the main trunk itself may become decayed and weakened.

4. Topped trees don't suit Newport's unique natural greenscapes.

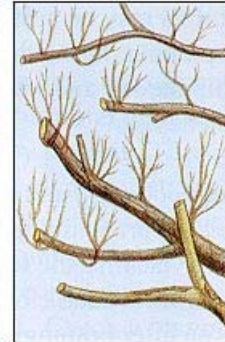
A tree that's mostly stubs and upward-growing shoots loses its graceful looks forever. The regrowth is all scraggly. It just doesn't fit into the natural vistas of trees, shrubs, flowers and lawns that so many Newporters are trying to sustain and so many visitors have enjoyed.

5. Topping can be costly.

As you can see, topping of upright branches (as well as tipping of sideways branches) isn't just a one-time thing. If you go that route, you'll have to get someone to top the tree again and again. The stubby-looking thing you end up with can notably reduce the value of your property. Odds are high that the tree itself will have to be removed before its time.



A. Topping



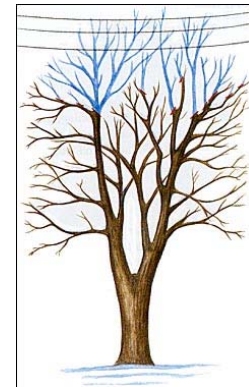
B. Tipping

Here's what you can do instead

Happily, there's a less costly path for keeping our tree sizes in check, with much more pleasing results.

- 1. When you're planting a young tree, select a species that will still fit the space you have for it after it has matured. Make sure it's not located too near a building, power line or street.**
- 2. Starting at an early stage, see that the tree is shaped, trimmed and thinned in a more natural way.**
- 3. If a tree has become too large and out of hand, have a competent tree service--one with insurance and a certified arborist--assess the situation. Then have that service do the recommended trimming, cabling or removal. To try to do this yourself could be ineffective, dangerous and more costly in the long run.**

If reducing the crown of a tree absolutely can't be avoided, make sure that the pruner doesn't just lop off branches like a hedge and leave stubs. That will cause decay, dieback and sprouts. As few limbs as possible should be trimmed back. They should be cut all the way back to branches that are in good health.



For more information

The diagrams are from the U.S. Department of Agriculture publication, "How to Prune Trees" (USDA, Forest Service, Northeast Area, NA-FR-01-95). The full publication can be reached on the Internet by typing in "USDA how to prune".

The Newport Tree Society provides very helpful information and links about tree care at www.newporttreesociety.org. Two other reliable sources that Tree and Parks Supervisor Scott Wheeler likes as a certified arborist are www.treesaregood.com and www.plantamnesty.org.

The Cooperative Extension Education Center at the University of Rhode Island has a gardening hotline: 1-800-448-1011. It is staffed by volunteers, Monday-Thursday, 9 am-2 pm. They can send you fact sheets to help with at least some of your questions about trees. Much of the same information is on the web at www.uri.edu/cc/factsheets.

The Tree Commission chairman, Susan Ruf, can be reached at 849-0296 and ruf@cox.net. Scott Warden, can be reached by phone at 845-5802 and by email at swheeler@cityofnewport.com. On the internet, typing in "Newport trees and parks" will lead directly to the City web page that