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Alamosa Trees
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Don't top trees, please!

Topless trees are more than just unattractive. The practices of topping and tipping trees are harmful!

Topping involves removing all parts of a tree above a certain height to reduce the tree's crown height. There is no consideration for its structure or health. Tipping is the cutting of lateral branches at right angles to the direction of growth to reduce crown width. According to the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA), both of these practices harm trees. You should not use them.

These methods provide only a temporary and ineffective solution that actually makes a tree more hazardous in the long run. The ISA's "Trees are Good" website lists several destructive effects of topping and tipping.

- 1) Starvation: Topping often removes 50 to 100 percent of the leaf-bearing crown, robbing the tree of food-creating leaves that produce energy for the tree. If a tree does not have enough stored energy, it will not be able to produce the chemicals required to defend the multiple wounds from disease or insect attack.
- 2) Creation of weak shoots: As a defense mechanism, a tree will quickly grow food-producing shoots that are weak and prone to breaking, resulting in a more hazardous tree.
- 3) Sunburn: The leaves within a tree's crown absorb sunlight. Without this protection, branches and trunks are exposed to high levels of light and heat, which can burn the tissues beneath the bark.
- 4) Higher maintenance costs: Trees that have been topped and tipped will need pruning more often, or may die and need to be removed. Topped trees are prone to breaking and can be hazardous. Because topping is considered an unacceptable pruning practice, any damage caused by branch failure of a topped tree may lead to a finding of negligence in a court of law. There are hidden costs as well. One is the reduction in property value. Healthy, well-maintained trees can add 10 to 20 percent to the value of a property. Disfigured, topped trees suggest an impending expense.
- 5) Disfiguration: And of course, since topping removes the ends of branches, unsightly stubs often remain destroying the natural form of the tree. A topped tree can never fully regain its natural form.

So what are the alternatives to topping and tipping? The ISA has suggestions. Sometimes a tree must be reduced in height or spread, for example to provide clearance for utility lines. The ISA recommends removing branches back to their point of origin. If a branch must be shortened, it should be cut back to a lateral that is large enough to assume the terminal role. A rule of thumb is to cut back to a lateral that is at least one-third the diameter of the limb being removed. This method of branch reduction helps to preserve the natural form of the tree. However, large cuts may inhibit the tree's ability to close over and compartmentalize the wounds.

Sometimes the best solution is to remove the tree and replace it with a species that is more appropriate for the site. Visit Alamosa Trees (www.AlamosaTrees.net) for a list of recommendations of the Alamosa Tree Board. Note: this site is a non-commercial site. Its mission is to promote a healthy community forest by educating residents about planting and caring for trees in our unique, often challenging, environment.

Please be aware that pruning large trees can be dangerous. It may be best to hire an arborist. Unfortunately, an online search didn't turn up any ISA-certified arborists in the San Luis Valley or any members of the Tree Care Industry Association or the American Society of Consulting Arborists. That doesn't mean you can't find someone who can do a good job. However, it does mean you will have to be careful in selecting a service. Be sure to ask for proof of insurance and specify that the arborist is liable

for damages to your or your neighbor's property. Ask for a list of references and don't hesitate to check them. Avoid using any tree services that advertise topping as a provided service. And don't use a service that uses tree-climbing spikes to climb the trees being pruned since spikes can damage a tree.

“A tree which has lost its head will never recover it again, and will survive only as a monument of the ignorance and folly of its Tormentor.” George William Curtis