

A Truth about Trees

Written by Jeff Shimonski, BT Contributor
July 2018

Topping can increase danger in a hurricane



It's once again hurricane season, though it seems like we've just finished cleaning up after Irma. What are you doing to prepare for a possible storm? Are you waiting to the last minute to "prune" your trees?

Perhaps you've checked with a competent arborist -- hopefully, not the guy who cuts your grass -- and discussed a structural pruning program that could help your tree form a stronger canopy.

Sadly, I have to assume most people haven't. The photo accompanying this article was taken recently of one of several topped trees on a property.

Let me first tell you that the removal of more than 25 percent of a tree's canopy in a given year is illegal in most municipalities. You can get fined for this practice. I've had livid property owners call me to spew venom about the city, the enforcement officer, and even that someone who had the gall to report the violation. It's no one's business what I do on my property, they insist. They were reducing hazardous conditions, they argue.

Well, perhaps tree work as a legal issue needs further discussion, but there is plenty of science to explain why you should never top trees in the manner of this one in the photo. I always ask property owners three questions:

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Who pruned your trees?

Are they certified arborists?

And what did they tell you about the necessary steps to reduce the risk of tree failure?

Folks, there are established standards of care and published international best-management practices on the pruning and care of trees. They're accessible online. Did the "arborist" you hired to work on your property to prune your trees discuss best-management practices with you? Were they even licensed and insured?

I hope it's all of the above since it is you, the property owner, who'll be fined by the municipality, not the tree guys who performed the work. That large live oak tree that you had removed without a tree removal permit on a Saturday evening will get you fined a substantial amount of money.

I fielded a couple of calls recently, in fact, from a really pissed-off homeowner who'd been fined several hundred dollars for topping the trees in the right-of-way in front of his home. I asked why the trees were topped in the first place, and whether the arborist who performed the work had explained that topping was illegal, not to mention deleterious to the long-term structural health of the trees.

The reply was that they were hazardous. I asked who had determined the trees were hazardous and if those hazards had been documented, hopefully in writing, by a certified arborist.

This really set off the homeowner. He wouldn't answer my questions. It felt like a hostile deposition as I explained the process that should have been followed to determine any hazardous conditions in those trees. When I further explained that ignorance of the law is no defense, I was told that this person made his living as a lawyer and was well acquainted with the law, thank you.

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Whew!

Your arborist needs to discuss with you the health and structural condition of the tree; the species profile, since different tree species have different growth and structural characteristics; the local tree ordinances since you don't want to be fined; and the long-term outlook on the health of your tree. This long-term outlook should include recommended follow-up pruning that will structurally improve the tree's canopy, based upon what the initial assessment revealed.

Have you ever watched a tree blowing around in high winds? The tree gets pushed in one direction by a gust of wind and then eventually recovers its original position. While it's moving back to its original position, the foliage and smaller branches move in the opposite direction to dampen the movement of the tree. This helps to protect the tree from damage and it works well -- trees have had millions of years to evolve these defensive characteristics.

But when you top your tree -- that is, when you cut off cut off all the major branches -- first, you've removed all of the food-making machinery: the leaves. Second, decay will spread into the cuts, or better-termed, the "infection courts," that have just been created. You have also removed the tree's ability to dampen its movement in gusts, thereby exposing the remaining branches and trunk to the direct force of the wind. That wind force is then transferred to the roots, and if the soil is very wet, the tree may fail.

We need to be prepared for those coming storms, but let's think this through first before damaging your trees.

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