

Let's Look at Trimming versus Topping

Trees that are topped under power lines often look as if they are shimmed off and have lost their heads and are hanging on to life with a few garrulous branches left to sprint toward the sky. Yet according to Public Service, foresters and tree companies hired to trim the trees they have to pursue intensive training to effectively and efficiently trim the trees. Why then does the tree out my front door under the power lines look like a bad abstract sculpture?

To trim the trees, Public Service Co. hires foresters from New Century Energies who direct the forestry polices for their company. The foresters then work with Asplundh Tree Service who does the actual trimming of the trees under the lines. Often the burnt orange trucks are seen working in the Evergreen, Conifer area. According to a spokesperson from the company, Tree trimmers not “toppers” are given on the job training in compliance with the OSHA standards developed by the company in cooperation with OSHA. But according to the spokesperson, trees are trimmed according to their species characteristics which means that a ponderosa may be topped because there is no other way to prune it . In addition, they follow the Alex Shigo method of tree trimming under power lines. Those who are in the tree business know that Shigo is one of the leading experts of tree health.

Another expert in the Colorado area is Dr. James Feucdt, professor at Colorado State University. His book Landscape Management is used by many tree experts in the area. In his book he says that tree topping should be avoided as much as possible because it affects the health of the tree by exposing large openings in the stem or trunk tissues which then become easy access points for microorganisms. It also removes large amounts of leaf bearing shoots which produce carbohydrates needed for callus formation.

If a tree must be topped he advocates using the drop crotch method in which all cuts are made outside a branch bark ridge and parallel with the remaining branches or leader.

His methods are emphasized in the July 1999 issue of the Journal of Arboriculture. in the article by James Fazio and Edwin Krumpe, researchers at the University of Idaho. Their recommendations include better education involving voluntary adoption of policies by all tree companies which place the practice of topping off limits to its personnel including those who work on power lines, except in rare justifiable circumstances.

This policy is not economically feasible, according to officials at Asplundh who do the trimming for Public Service Co. Perhaps it's better to remove the tree when it's under a power line.

Dr. Joan Spalding is a member of the Commercial Arborists Association and an educational consultant.