

Green Valley Gardeners: Problems with tree topping and alternatives

By Mary Kidnocker For the Green Valley News Feb 5, 2026

This is the time of year for necessary pruning of dormant desert trees. However, the winter silhouette of a tree can be destroyed by topping. And keep in mind that topping a tree does not keep it small.

After a deciduous tree is topped, its growth rate actually increases. It grows quickly in an attempt to replace missing foliage which is its food source. A tree needs its leaves to produce food for its branches, trunk and roots. Repeated removal of foliage can cause the tree to starve.

Additionally, new limbs lack the structural integrity of the originals, are often weakly attached, break easily and few will bloom in spring.

Often the tree's health is damaged so much when topped that it does not have enough energy to reestablish. A stressed tree is susceptible to disease and invasion of organisms. Thereafter a downward spiral may continue until the tree dies. Many horticulturists say that when topped to stop growth, the tree has already been killed.

Topping is also expensive because it must be repeated every few years. Eventually the tree will need to be removed when it dies or the owner simply becomes tired of the on-going costs.

When a branch is removed, many long slender shoots hurriedly grow to replace it. When cut again and regrowing the following year, it must be done yet once more.

In other words, a costly “maintenance monster” has been created.

The resulting regrowth after topping makes the canopy top-heavy, which increases the possibility of being blown over. Carefully thinned trees will allow the wind to pass through the branches.

With proper pruning, a surge of regrowth is not stimulated, but instead the health and appearance of the tree are improved. A properly shaped tree may add to the value of property. Real estate appraisers have even been known to deduct value for an obviously topped tree in the landscape.

Framing a view is a good alternative to tree topping. A view through or between trees is almost always better than a view without them. Use careful and artful interior thinning; existing trees can be made part of the view by adding perspective to distant vistas. Frame your view!

Another option to open up a view is by removing lower limbs, or “skirting up” the tree. In this case, the canopy is raised above the view, preserving both the tree and the view.

Before planning to top your trees, consult a certified arborist and discuss the best solution for your specific landscape scene.