**To Top or Not to Top?**

by Dawn Standke

A number of trainees noticed that Tom Spellman said to top fruit trees, but Robin Rivet said to never top a tree. Which is correct?

First, let me say that Robin is absolutely right that landscape trees should never be topped.

“Topping is the indiscriminate cutting of tree branches to stubs or to lateral branches that are not large enough to assume the terminal role. Other names for topping include ‘heading,’ ‘tipping,’ and hat-racking.’”

Both of these resources do a good job explaining why topping damages trees:

<https://www.arborday.org/programs/treecityusa/bulletins/documents/008-summary.pdf>

<http://www.treesaregood.com/treecare/resources/whytoppinghurts.pdf>

When you cut the middle of a branch, multiple shoots will develop, as in the picture below. This bushy growth is sometimes referred to as a “witch’s broom.” Instead of keeping the tree at the desired height, this pruning method results in tree rapidly growing taller.



The preferred method of controlling the size of a tree is known as “drop-crotching” where branches which are too tall are removed at the point of attachment – or crotch. The tree will grow back more slowly than if it had been topped, plus the shape of the tree will be much more natural.



A different method for pruning fruit trees can be found on the Dave Wilson site: <http://www.davewilson.com/home-gardens/backyard-orchard-culture>



Topping or hedging your fruit tree as in the photo above is quicker than drop-crotching, but you will need to prune frequently to keep your tree to the desired size. It is not ideal because you are not opening the center of the tree to allow in light and air, and you are not managing the fruiting wood, which is important on deciduous fruit trees.

Dawn’s advice – if you won’t get around to it otherwise, go ahead and top/hedge your fruit tree at the height that you have chosen. A fruit tree managed this way won’t be large enough to be dangerous from the poorly attached shoots which will quickly grow back.

However, if you take time to properly prune your tree, it will reward you with a better harvest and a more attractive and healthy form.

I highly recommend that you make time to take *Pruning Fruit Trees & Vines* at Southwestern College, taught by rare fruit grower and fruit tree expert Tom Del Hotel. Lecture is Tuesday nights, and hand-on pruning of the Southwestern fruit orchard under Tom’s watchful eye is on Saturdays. The class runs from Feb – March each year. Tom will teach you proper pruning, including how to bend a young tree to get the low branching we want. Tom never tops a tree - not even the “knee high” topping of a brand new tree that Tom Spellman described.

I also highly recommend that MGs take Tree ID and plant ID classes. Classes are offered at Southwestern College, Cuyamaca College, Mesa College, and Mira Costa College.

**For information on pruning specific fruit tree varieties see** http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/GARDEN/fruit.html