



Arbor Operations

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TOLL FREE: 1800 652 862

Lopping Vs Pruning

Which is best for the health of your tree?

What is the difference?

Lopping is the indiscriminate cutting of tree branches to stubs or lateral branches that are not large enough to assume the terminal (main growth point) role. The most common reason given for lopping is to reduce the size of a tree. Often home owners feel that their trees have become too large for their property coupled with a fear that tall trees may pose a hazard. Lopping, however, is not a viable method of height reduction and certainly does not reduce the hazard. In fact, lopping is costly and will make a tree more hazardous in the long term.

The process of lopping can remove up between 50% to 100% of the foliage (leaf) bearing crown of a tree. Because leaves are the food factories of a tree, removing them can temporarily starve a tree. *(Photo A shows a tree with a significant amount of vegetation removed.)*

The severity of the pruning triggers a sort of survival mechanism. The tree activates latent buds, forcing the rapid growth of multiple shoots below each cut. These are called 'epicormic' shoots and are weakly attached. The tree needs to put out a new crop of leaves as soon as possible. If a tree does not have the stored energy reserves to do so, it will be seriously weakened / stressed and may die. *(Photo B shows a lopped tree canopy with epicormic growth.)*

A stressed tree is more vulnerable to insect and disease infestations. Large, open pruning wounds expose the sapwood and heartwood to attacks by pests and disease. The tree may lack sufficient energy to chemically defend the wounds against invasion, and some insects are actually attracted to the chemical signals trees release.

The preferred location to make a pruning cut is just beyond the branch collar at the branch's point of attachment. The tree is biologically equipped to close such a wound, provided the tree is healthy enough and the wound is not too large. Cuts made along a limb between lateral branches create stubs with wounds that the tree may not be able to close. The exposed wood tissue begins to decay. Normally, a tree will "compartmentalize" (the tree's protective mechanism), the decaying tissues, but few trees can defend the multiple severe wounds caused by lopping. The decay organisms are given a free path to move down through the branches to the stem resulting in the ultimate demise of the specimen. *(Photo C shows a pruning wound which has not healed and decay has travelled down the stem.)*

Branches within a tree's crown produce thousands of leaves to absorb sunlight. When the leaves are removed, the remaining branches and trunk are suddenly exposed to high levels of light and heat. The result may be sunburn of the tissues beneath the bark, which can lead to incidence of disease, bark splitting and death of some branches.

The survival mechanism that causes a tree to produce multiple epicormic shoots below each topping cut comes at great expense to the tree. These shoots develop from buds near the surface of the old branches. Unlike normal branches that develop in a socket of overlapping wood tissues, epicormic growth is anchored only in the outermost layers of the parent branches.

Epicormic shoots grow quickly, up to 6 metres in one year in some species. Unfortunately, these shoots are prone to breaking, especially during stormy windy conditions.

The cost of lopping a tree is not limited to what the perpetrator is paid. If the tree survives, it will require pruning again within a few years. It will either need to be reduced again or storm damage will have to be cleaned up. If the tree dies, it will have to be removed. *(Photo D shows severe decay at the base of the tree which weakens its structural integrity and therefore poses a failure risk.)*



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Lopping is a high-maintenance pruning practice, with some hidden costs. One is the reduction in property value. Healthy, well-maintained trees can add to the value of a property. Disfigured, lopped trees are considered an impending expense.

Another possible cost of lopped trees is potential liability. Lopped trees are prone to breaking and can be hazardous. Because lopping is considered an unacceptable pruning practice, any damage caused by branch failure of a lopped tree may lead to a finding of negligence in a court of law.

In conclusion, qualified Arborists understand that all work performed on a tree should be done with a specific purpose in mind and to be performed in accordance with Australian Standard 4373-2007 Pruning of Amenity Trees. Properly maintaining trees, through periodic professional pruning, enhances the overall life of the tree and invigorates healthy plant growth – thereby ensuring a safer, more valuable asset to your property.



Photo A – Tree with significant vegetation removed



Photo B – Lopped tree canopy with 3 months epicormic growth



Photo C – Pruning wound which has not healed and decay has travelled down stem



Photo D – Severely decayed base of tree