

## Making Good Choices for Trees

Cindy Gilberg

Missouri tests our trees with its ice storms, rain storms and high winds. Some of these events have left damaged trees, but, for the most part, healthy, well-maintained trees have survived these tempests. Even so, many homeowners and some tree service companies have chosen to top trees (the severe removal of the top branches in mature trees) to prevent storm damage to houses. On the contrary, tree topping (also known as studding, heading or lopping) creates weaker branches and potential for diseases that can kill the whole tree. In the long run, especially when the tree dies and needs to be replaced, tree topping can actually cost you more in labor and dollars. If you are considering tree topping, please read on. You may want to consider having your tree evaluated first. It will likely save you money in the long run.



Left: Bill Spradley's Trees, Forests, and Landscapes uses a spider-lift to correctly prune trees. Right: Topped tree is weakened and may die prematurely from disease.

The Missouri Anti-Tree Topping Campaign was formed to provide quality information for anyone who has trees. You can call 1-877-406-6867, talk to a real person (Really! I tried it a number of times) and have information sent. For the computer savvy, the website ([www.communitytrees.com/treetopping.html](http://www.communitytrees.com/treetopping.html)) is packed with information.

When you are ready to select a tree care specialist, use only a certified arborist whose job it is to promote a well-maintained, long-lived tree. Proper pruning and care results in a healthy tree that has natural beauty and shape. A list of certified arborists can be seen at the Horticultural Co-op of Metro St. Louis's website ([www.hortco-op.org](http://www.hortco-op.org)).

Mike Sestric, a certified arborist who works for Trees, Forests, and Landscapes of Kirkwood, says their focus is "dedication to tree health and safety with the emphasis on safety when working with trees". Trees, Forests and Landscapes is a professional tree care company ([www.treesforestsandlandscapes.com](http://www.treesforestsandlandscapes.com)) owned by Bill Spradley, also a certified arborist. For much of their tree work they now use a spider lift. This equipment gives safe access to eighty percent of the trees, a significant increase over the usual thirty to forty percent with conventional bucket trucks. The light-weight spider lift can be maneuvered into tiny spaces and eliminates much of the need for more dangerous climbing.

If you are faced with replacing a large tree that has died, choosing the right tree for the right place is a tremendous first step towards good tree health. Carefully match your tree selection with soil and light condition (dry, wet, sun or shade). If a shade tree is what you desire, consider long-lived native oak trees like bur oak, chinquapin oak, or swamp white oak. All are tolerant of a wide range of soil and light conditions and contrary to common belief, these species grow quite rapidly. One of my favorite medium-sized trees is the black tupelo tree (*Nyssa sylvatica*). It has a beautiful rounded shape and striking fall color. Tupelo can grow in soil that is moist since it grows in lowlands in Missouri, although it is equally tolerant of dry soils. Small trees like Ohio buckeye and pawpaw are the best choices for working under utility lines while redbud, flowering dogwood, and witch hazel work well close to the house.. Always check into the tree's mature height, breadth and cultural requirements before making a decision as to which tree to plant where.

There are so many choices for many conditions that nothing beats a few good resources for tree information. You can find lists, cultural information and photos of recommended trees for Missouri at [www.grownative.org](http://www.grownative.org). Lists of both native and non-native trees are available at [www.mocommunitytrees.com/treetopping.html](http://www.mocommunitytrees.com/treetopping.html). Some great reference books are *Tried and True Missouri Native Plants for Your Yard*, *Trees of Missouri* and *Native Landscaping for Wildlife and People*. These are all available at the Visitors' Center at Shaw Nature Reserve and at MO. Department of Conservation-Powder Valley.

To those that say they contemplate not planting trees at all I answer that a well chosen, well maintained tree is not a detriment, it is an asset. The most obvious benefits are that trees provide shade, reduce energy costs and increased property values. Less obvious, but equally as important is that trees offer shelter, nesting sites and, in many cases, food for numerous native birds and mammals.