Today's Tree Questions

The following series are questions and situations received by the City Forester. The answers to the questions are meant to encourage learning about trees and serve to stimulate requests for more information on the subjects. Check back monthly for new Today's Tree Questions.

Who is responsible for tree maintenance?

On private property, the owner of the property is generally the responsible party. On property located within a right-of-way or easement it often depends upon an agreement, often stated on the title or deed for that property. Along street right-of-ways, it depends upon the particular jurisdiction's codes or ordinances.

For street right-of-ways in Renton, it depends upon the location in the city. Generally and by City code, the property owner that is adjacent to the street right-of-way is responsible for street tree maintenance. However, there are areas of the city where this is not the case, especially in the downtown business district and along some of the busier and recently reconstructed streets. Most trees on private residential property are maintained by the property owners. Outside of city limits King County rules may apply - contact King County Parks for more information

Do I need to get permission to work on a tree?

Work performed on trees growing on your property obviously does not require permission from anyone, except perhaps a spouse, unless drastic action to trees is planned. Drastic action would include removing or topping a tree. Tree removal requires a City permit if more than three trees are considered for removal during a year. Permits may be required if removal occurs on property designated by a conservation easement, critical area regulation, site landscape plan or tree retention requirement. Whatever the reason for removal, there should be clear justification. While the tree may be private, it contributes to the quality of life for all Renton residents and provides positive ecosystem services affecting the region and beyond.

Tree topping is not an acceptable practice, even for fruit trees. According to City Code, tree topping is prohibited anywhere within Renton to street trees that are part of landscape development requirements. See the next section on tree topping for more information.

Work performed on private trees on property you do not own obviously requires the owner's permission. More than likely the property owner will not give permission unless there is clear justification for the work intended. For example, if your neighbor's

tree branches hang over your house and rub on the shingles this might be good justification. You don't need permission to perform work to the portion hanging over the property line except if the work will adversely affect the health of the tree but it is good policy to speak with your neighbor first. You can only perform work to that portion of the tree up to the property line unless your neighbor agrees otherwise. This includes the roots, branches and the tree stem. In addition, you should get permission to keep fruit from branches growing over the property line.

Special circumstances:

- Boundary line trees. A boundary line tree is one that has some portion of the above ground roots or lower stem, generally at the ground line, which touches your property and your neighbor's property. Permission should be obtained from the neighbor before doing any work on the tree and your neighbor needs to get your permission to work on the tree.

- Trees in the street right-of-way. Discussed above, you may be required to get permission to perform work on trees found within the street right-of-way. Contact the City Forester to make this determination.

Will topping make my tree safer?

Topping is not an acceptable tree maintenance practice. Topping damages trees beyond repair, increases the safety risk of the tree, promotes disease and insect problems and shortens the life span of the tree.

An understanding of tree biology helps to explain why topping is bad. What is tree food? Fertilizer is not tree food, a common myth. Trees produce their own food mostly manufactured by leaves (less from branches and stems). Trees need their leaves to support their size and growth. The chlorophyll found in leaves, through a complex of chemical interactions, produce food for the tree. Topping removes the leaf-producing organs of the tree, the branches and twigs, thus starving the tree and beginning the tree's decline. Fertilizer is similar to vitamins providing the tree with essential elements but is not food.

Topping creates large wounds in the main branches and stem of the tree which never completely grow over. These large wounds increase the amount of decay at the cuts allowing decay to advance down the branch or stem. At the location of the cut, new sprouts arise in response to the drastic loss of leaves and are weakly attached at the outermost part of the branch or stem. These sprouts grow vigorously at the expense of the tree (stressing it further). The stage is then set for creating a greater safety risk from:

- a large wound that becomes decayed, with decay increasing with time and;

- sprouts which grow large quickly, weakly attached adjacent to decaying wood.

As time passes, risk increases, somewhat like a ticking time bomb where the explosion is the snapping-off of the now much larger sprout(s), weakly attached to the stem containing the ever increasing pocket of decay.

There are many alternatives to topping and which method to select depends upon specific goals. Contact the City Forester before considering tree topping for better alternative solutions. More information on topping is available in brochures from the Forestry Program.

We landscaped around a new addition to our home and this summer our 50-year old maple tree began to show many large dead branches. Will my tree come back
healthy next spring?

Healthy trees require oxygen and water in the soil to remain healthy. Disruption of this system can stress or kill trees. Soil disturbance is one reason trees decline. Compaction of soil occurs when heavy equipment moves over the soil where trees grow adversely affecting oxygen and water penetration.

Most tree roots are within the upper 18 inches of soil, especially those that absorb water and nutrients. Soil disturbance also occurs when the soil around the tree is scraped away or during digging operations. Therefore, removing soil removes important water absorbing roots.

Tree root zones can be hundreds of feet from the tree stem, usually two to three times the distance measured from the trunk of the tree to the outermost branch tips. The number of roots removed determines if the tree will live or die and for how long. Trees have died from planting numerous new shrubs, flowers or groundcovers in the tree root zone as the result of root cutting during planting, coupled with an increase in competition for soil and water from the new plants.

Adding soil around trees can negatively affect trees by disrupting water and oxygen penetration to the roots. Some species tolerate more soil filling than others. Only add soil if absolutely necessary and use very small amounts over time. Soil should never be added so that it touches the base of the tree, this will rot the bark and wood and eventually kills the tree.

Construction activities can have negative impacts to trees or other vegetation if not properly planned and coordinated with all the parties involved. Tree protection measures should be considered and be in place before construction begins.

Once the damage has occurred it is nearly impossible to correct and can be very expensive. Older trees tolerate fewer disturbances than younger trees.

Construction Example. Scraping soil off a site supporting older trees removes many tree roots and compacts soil; adding new soil further compacts soil and covers remaining roots, reducing oxygen and water penetration to the roots and; placing sod over the new soil compacts the soil and increases competition for the trees. This scenario will slowly kill trees over the next five to ten years.

Preventing the above scenario might include a landscape plan that minimizes soil disturbance, encourages existing native shrubs, placing a thick mat of wood chips to prevent soil compaction from equipment and fencing valuable trees so equipment, materials and supplies do not enter critical root zones of trees.

For further information on tree protection please contact the City Forester before planning your next construction project near trees. Read more information on Protecting Trees from Construction Damage by requesting a brochure from the Forestry Program.