

HOME/REAL ESTATE

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Seattleites have a reputation for being ever so civilized, with their lattes and book groups and religious devotion to crossing only with the light and at the crosswalk. Don't be taken in. Under that

mild-mannered exterior beats the pitiless heart of a butcher.

Take your average homeowner. Oh, she may look ordinary enough. But just put into her hands a sharpened pair of pruning shears and her eyes begin to glint; her breathing quickens. Then WHACK! Whack, whack, whack, whack! Another innocent tree or shrub joins the Hall of Pruning Horrors.

You've seen the kind of thing I'm talking about, I'm sure. Amputated trees ending abruptly at roofline in a series of airborne stumps. Shrubs ruthlessly shaved into shapes that would make a poodle blush for shame. Plants whose every identifiable feature has been so thoroughly sheared away they could qualify for the Federal Witness Protection Program.

Such pruning, dear reader, is a crime against nature. And plants can't really fight back (though large, badly mangled trees can fall on your house and squash it).

Fortunately, plants have an ally in the form of Cass Turnbull, founder of the nonprofit organization Plant Amnesty. "Stop the Senseless Torture and Mutilation of Trees and Shrubs" is her battle cry. The 900-member group's mission statement is a little more restrained: to promote responsible pruning and other landscape management practices.

Turnbull is a professional maintenance gardener and a certified International Society of Arboriculture arborist. Though her message — responsible pruning — is a serious one, she and fellow Plant Amnesty members use humor to get their message across. They show "The Slideshow of Pruning Horrors" to gardening groups; erect a Horticultural Confessional at plant sales where gardeners can confess their horticultural sins to Father Weedo; and stage a Bizarre Yard Art photo contest.

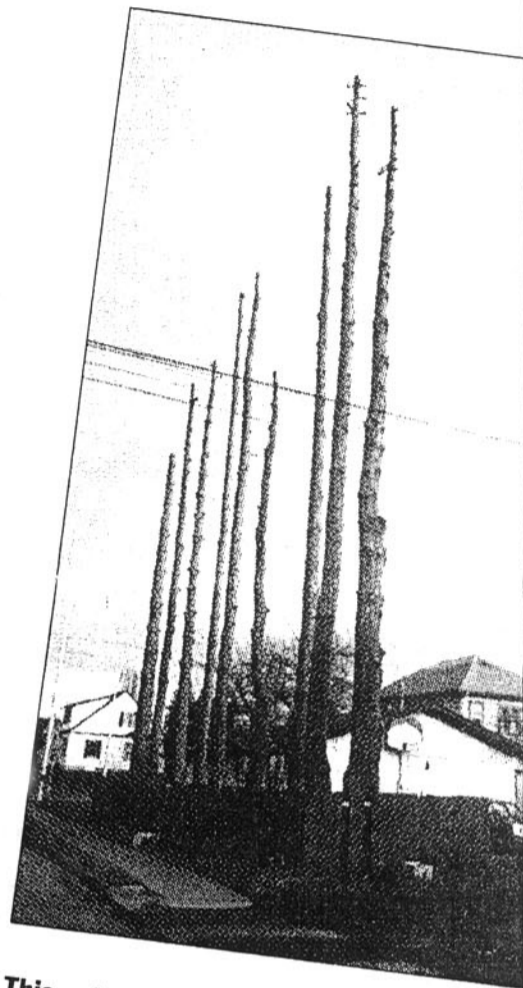
Turnbull and other gardening experts object to bad pruning on aesthetic grounds, but they have practical objections, too. Poor pruning creates unhealthy, high maintenance plants. Here's how:

When you shear or top a plant, you are making what are called nonselective heading cuts — cutting midbranch instead of at the stem, trunk or where one branch comes off a larger one. Heading cuts provoke a growth spurt. An unattractive thatch of antennalike suckers (technically called water

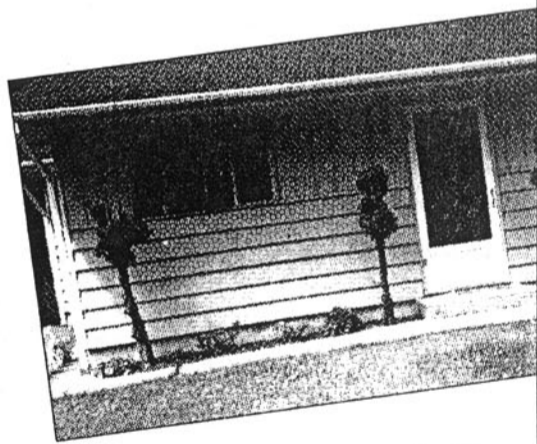
PLEASE SEE *McGrath* ON F 7

PLANT AMNESTY'S **hall** OF **pruning horrors**

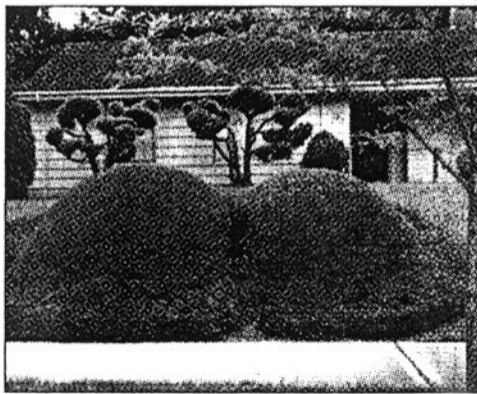
Here are a few entries from their bizarre yard art contest



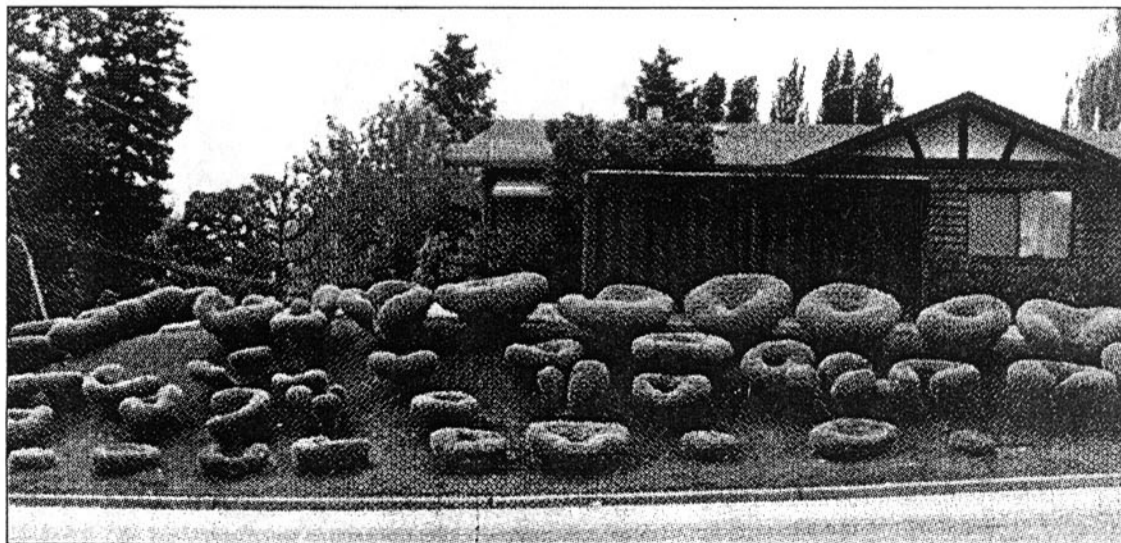
This entry, from Tacoma, is entitled "Big trees without the mess."



"Limb 'em up, head 'em back — raw bark!" So says this entry.



Twin peaks? Plant Amnesty calls this one "Lift and separate."



"Totally tubular!" is what this Eastside entry was named.

This poor tree in Forks was left with barely a fork in its branches.



Plant Amnesty's hall of pruning horrors

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sprouts) springs up from the cuts. Now the shrub you "tidied" looks twice as unkempt, so you prune again, galvanizing another spasm of regrowth.

Soon you are Hercules, battling the Hydra: The more you shear, the more you need to shear. The plants you are trying to control look dreadful even to you, and you find yourself quitting your day job in order to stay home and whip the insubordinate shrubs into line.

Unless you are trying to create a formal hedge or topiary, stay away from shearing. Plant shrubs whose natural forms are pleasing to you and make sure they are planted where they will have enough space when they are full grown. If the bed looks gappy in the meantime, fill in with annuals.

Sheared shrubs, however objectionable, are nothing to topped trees. These are the very hallmark of bad taste — and bad judgment, because topping creates dangerous trees.

When you top a tree, you open it to decay. Pretty soon the heartwood begins to rot. Large branches that are weakly attached also form. Now you have a tree much more likely to succumb in a storm. Data from Florida show that trees that have been topped sustain more damage in hurricanes than do properly pruned trees. (In Florida, topping is called hat-racking and is very popular.)

Brian Fisher, past president of the Northwest Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture, sums up the issue of topping rather nicely: "Topping trees is like wetting your pants. It may be expedient, but it won't impress anyone, and sooner or later you will feel very uncomfortable about it."

The principal reason people hereabouts top trees is to open up or preserve a view. (Keeping limbs away from wires runs a close second.) I sympathize. A lovely view is a wonderful thing to live with and it adds pots of money to the value of your house. But do you need an entirely treeless view? Or one with mangled gargoyles along the bottom of the picture-postcard?

A Plant Amnesty publication, "Saving Trees and Views," offers design tips on how to expand your view and even improve on it without butchering the trees in the foreground. If trees must be gotten out of the way, chop them down entirely and plant smaller ones in their places. Just don't top them.



After being topped, this big leaf maple has grown water sprouts.

The same goes for shrubs. If you are hacking back shrubs because they are planted too thickly or have outgrown their site, don't prolong the agony. Better to put the shrub out of its misery by transplanting or straightforward murder than to humiliate it indefinitely.

Better yet, if you are reluctant to kill an innocent shrub just because it has grown too big, Plant Amnesty offers a wonderful alternative. Give your shrub a gift for either Earth Day April 22 or National Arbor Day on April 26 by advertising your problem plant in the Adopt-A-Plant column — a sort of Plants Personals — of their quarterly newsletter. Someone who covets your shrub or small tree will dig it up and haul it away.

Plant Amnesty can also help you rehabilitate your abused-by-pruning shrubs, should you decide to go au naturel. It may take a few years, and not all varieties are salvageable, but it is usually worth a try. "Unshearing Shrubs" is the publication you're

looking for, and ordering information is listed below.

The truth is, with the exception of roses, vines, fruit trees and some berries, most plants just don't need much pruning. And it should always

be subtle, never obvious. Cut away dead wood. Thin a bit. Prune crossed or rubbing branches. In most cases that's all that's needed. Turnbull estimates that a gardener should spend only about two hours on pruning in an average year.

If you are a recovering pruner, this may leave quite a lot of time on your hands. Spend it looking at gardens. Admire the variety of plant shapes: The exuberant wands of forsythia. The elegant, angular branches of flowering quince. The arching sprays of Cotoneaster. This is what plants are supposed to look like.

Resources

- If you need pruning work done, look under Tree Service in the Yellow Pages for someone who belongs to the International Society of Arboriculture or is listed as a certified arborist. Plant Amnesty, 783-9813, also makes referrals. If you are a landscape or tree professional who would like to be on the organization's referral list, you can also call the number above.

- To find out more about Plant Amnesty, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Plant Amnesty, 906 N.W. 87th St., Seattle, WA 98117. They will send you a publication list and order form, a sample newsletter and a free pruning guide. Membership is \$25 a year.

- Another wonderful resource for gardeners is the Elisabeth C. Miller Library at the University of Washington's Center for Urban Horticulture at 3501 N.E. 41st St. Call 543-0415 for hours and directions.

Susan McGrath's column runs every two weeks. Send questions to: *The Household Environmentalist*, P.O. Box 70, Seattle 98111.

