

FORESTRY FACTS

UW
Extension

COLLEGE OF
**AGRICULTURAL
& LIFE SCIENCES**
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Department of Forest Ecology and Management • School of Natural Resources

No. 51

September, 1990

Walnut Tips – Top Pruning

Growing high quality walnut trees depends on obtaining the best stock, careful planting and appropriate follow-up care. Of the three of these, attention to planting is most often ignored. It is, however, vitally important. With a simple procedure called top pruning you can help your new seedlings get off to a strong and straight start. Top pruning may take only a few seconds, but it will go a long way toward protecting your investment.

THE PROBLEM

There are two reasons you will want to top prune your seedlings. The first is to help your seedlings recover from damage that occurs when they are removed from nursery beds. The second is to ensure that they are not damaged in planting.

Nursery trauma: When a seedling is lifted from its nursery bed a certain percentage of its root mass is injured or lost. This disturbs the balance between the roots and shoots (above ground growth). Often, too few roots remain to support the shoot. When these seedlings are replanted (*outplanted*) the tops will die back. With less extensive root damage, the shoot may not actually die back but initial height growth may be minimal. **Top pruning will strengthen your seedling by reestablishing the balance between roots and shoots.**

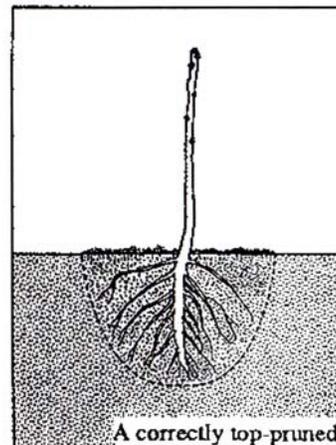
Another kind of nursery trauma may be seen when the tops are broken and buds torn off. This can happen in even the most careful of nurseries. In this case, secondary buds along the side of the shoot will take over and your seedling will grow crooked with poor structural support. **Top pruning promotes straight growth.**

Planting trauma: Typically, nursery grown walnut seedlings are up to 18 inches tall. They are too unweildy to plant by hand and too tall for most machine planters. During machine planting seedlings hit the underside of the planter's seat as it passes over them and they end up planted at an angle. This results in poor growth form and poor

quality. **Top pruning helps your seedlings stay vertical when planted.**

THE SOLUTION

The way to overcome these problems is to top prune the seedlings. With a hand pruner or loper, cut the seedlings back to a height of 8 to 10 inches above the *root collar* (the swollen joint between the shoot and roots). This pruning will put the seedling's roots and shoot back into balance: shoot dieback will not occur and the seedling can send out a new straight terminal shoot. Also, the seedling will be easier to handle for hand planting and it will be an appropriate size for machine planting. It's very little work for big rewards.



A correctly top-pruned seedling
(from USDA Forest Service's "Walnut Notes")

Walnut Tips is produced in cooperation with the Wisconsin Walnut Council. *Top Pruning* is written by Rudy Nigl and Leigh Vanderklein.