

# Trees



BELLEVUE  
**CONFLICT  
RESOLUTION**  
CENTER



*Laws change frequently and vary from city to city and from state to state. This information should not be construed as legal advice.*

Trees are often at the “root” of many conflicts. People move to the Pacific Northwest to enjoy the wooded environment and purchase real estate for its existing trees. Others plant trees specifically to provide erosion control, shade or privacy.

Conflicts can arise when trees block views or sunlight, shed debris, or cause property damage. These problems are both common and solvable with a little information and goodwill.

## Who owns the tree?

If a tree’s trunk is completely on one side of a property line, then the tree belongs to that property owner. If the tree is a boundary tree, with its trunk straddling a property line, then the tree is jointly owned by each landowner. A person who removes or kills a tree that is owned or partially owned by someone else, accidentally or intentionally, may have to pay the tree owner for damages and penalties.

## Can I trim my neighbor’s tree?

Before you think about trimming, consider the health and symmetry of the tree. Another approach may be to offer to share the cost of trimming the whole tree. Remember that a trimming conversation with your neighbor might be easier if you haven’t already removed limbs or roots without warning.

## Tips on approaching conflict:

1. **Assess** the situation.
2. **Request** a time to talk.
3. **Share**, not just tell.
4. **Know** what you'll say.
5. **Listen** respectfully, as you would want to be heard.
6. **Be open** to different solutions.
7. **Make an agreement**, at least about the next step.
8. **Thank** the other person for working with you.

## What does the law say?

- [Tree Pruning Guidelines](#)
- [Find an Arborist](#)
- [Bellevue Tree Rules](#)

## Contact Us:

[Intake Form](#)

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In most cases, you are permitted to trim branches and roots of trees on your side of the property line, most likely at your own expense. However, there are guidelines:

- Trim only up to the property line
- Do not enter the owner's property without permission
- Generally avoid destroying or damaging the tree by over-trimming roots or branches

### **Must I clean up after my neighbor's tree?**

You are responsible for cleaning up branches you trim and for picking up any leaves, needles, nuts, etc. that fall on your side of the property.

### **What if a tree is dangerous?**

The first thing to do is talk to the tree owner. Usually, a tree owner is not responsible for damage that their tree causes. However, if a tree owner knows that his tree is unsafe and does nothing, they may be liable for damages caused by the tree. Your neighbor may need proof that the tree is a danger, and you may want to get the expert advice of an arborist or a tree service. This can seem expensive but may be the most cost-effective prevention measure in the long run. You may want to send a written note to your neighbor, along with the expert opinion.

### **What can be done if a tree blocks a view?**

In most areas, there are no laws that protect views. However, you may live in a neighborhood that is protected by covenants. Check with your neighborhood association to see if they have procedures for addressing view concerns. There are many ways to trim trees to maximize views without removing or topping a tree:

**Thinning** (keeping the structure but removing some foliage): Trees can be made more satisfactory as focal points by thinning the canopy. The amount that can be safely removed varies by species and should be done by tree experts. Generally, you don't want to remove more than a quarter of the branches in a single pruning.

**Windowing** (creating view holes): Windowing is often the best choice when a tree is large and close to structures. By carefully choosing which branches to cut, tree trimming experts can create a window in a tree that allows a fully framed view of whatever lies beyond. You can balance the look of the tree by pruning the other side as well.

**Skirting** (removing the lower portion): Removing the lower limbs of a tree may open the view. This is called skirting or limbing up. It is not a good idea to skirt more than a third of the way up. The tree can become top-heavy and may pose a danger.

**Crown Reduction** (reducing the height of a tree): By choosing limbs carefully, you can remove some of the tallest branches to reduce the size of the tree. This is not the same as topping, which should be avoided. If a topped tree survives, a dense mass of branches and shoots will eventually create a broader and denser top than was there before.

### **Can I remove my own trees?**

Bellevue code has changed. Permits are now required to remove "significant" trees with trunks wider than six inches in diameter. This is true even if a qualified professional determines the tree is hazardous. If a permit is granted, a new tree often needs to be planted as a replacement somewhere on the property.

### **What if the tree is really bothering you?**

Speaking with your neighbor is the best approach. Before you go to talk with your neighbor, think about what is troubling you and ask yourself several questions:

- What is bothering me about the tree?
- What does my neighbor like about the tree?
- What do you need?
- What might your neighbor need?

When approaching your neighbor, express your concerns rather than your solutions. Think of a non-threatening approach. For example, *"I am having difficulty maintaining my gutters with all of the needles that fall from your fir tree"* is much kinder than: *"You need to buy me new gutters."*

Next, express your needs: *"It's important to me to have more sunlight for my vegetable garden"*, or, *"I'd like to spend less time on yard maintenance."*

Be prepared to listen to your neighbor's point of view. Realistic and durable solutions accommodate everyone's needs. Ask the other person to tell you what they value about the tree. Look for a lasting solution that doesn't create hard feelings. Ask your neighbor what kinds of options they would consider. By asking for help with developing options, you will increase the likelihood of finding an idea that works for everyone. *"If we could find a solution that protected your privacy and restored my view, would you consider it?"*

If you decide that you want to negotiate with your neighbor, but aren't sure how to start the conversation, call the Bellevue Conflict Resolution Center. We can coach you on how to talk with your neighbor, or we can talk to your neighbor for you to learn more about what is important to them and what solutions they might be willing to consider.

