

Frequently Asked Questions Tree Removal in the City of Issaquah



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ISSAQUAH
WASHINGTON

Why does Issaquah want to Preserve Trees?

Trees are a valuable asset to the community both for their aesthetic value and for their ecological benefits. Trees reduce the impact of stormwater runoff, improve air quality, moderate the effects of wind and temperature, enhance the visual appearance of the community, and are protected in a variety of ways. One of Issaquah's Treasures is the lush, open, tree-covered mountain tops of the Issaquah Alps. Although trees can be removed and replaced with new plantings, it takes many years or decades for young trees to reach maturity and match the benefits of existing trees. If you are considering cutting or removing trees on your property you should review this material before beginning.

1. What do I do if I want to remove a tree in the City of Issaquah?

Regardless of the situation, the first step is to complete and submit a tree removal form. Tree removal forms are used by the City to keep track of tree removal requests. The form also serves as a tree removal permit application in those situations where a tree removal permit is required.

2. Do I need a permit to remove a tree in Issaquah?

For single family properties – a property with a single-family home – an allotted number of Significant Trees (trees between 6 and 30 inch diameter measured at 4 1/2 feet above the ground) are allowed to be removed within a year or five year period *without* a permit. The number of trees allowed to be removed without a permit varies depending upon the size of your lot as follows:

- lots up to 10,000 sq.ft. – a maximum of 2 trees in one year and 4 in five years
- lots between 10,001 and 20,000 sq.ft. – 4 trees in one year and 8 in five years
- lots greater than 20,001 sq.ft. – 6 trees in one year and 12 in five years

Also, an approved tree removal permit is always required for the removal or alteration of landmark trees, defined as trees with a diameter at breast height (DBH) of greater than 30 inches. The City wants to emphasize the importance of retaining older large trees, so trees with a DBH of greater than 30 inches cannot be removed without an approved tree removal permit.

3. How do I apply for a tree removal permit?

The form used to track tree removals – the tree removal form – also serves as the tree removal permit application. If you know you need a permit for your tree removal – for example if you are exceeding the number of trees allowed to be removed in a year or five years without a permit – simply indicate so on the form, include a plan showing the location of trees proposed to be removed, and submit it to the City of Issaquah Permit Center. The permit application can be submitted electronically, but to be able to include hard copies of the required tree plan electronically may be problematic so submission by mail or hand delivery to the Permit Center may be preferred.

4. Will my tree removal permit be approved?

Tree regulations in the City of Issaquah generally discourage removal of trees in excess of those allowed to be removed without a permit in any one or five year period. Your tree removal permit request will

be considered for approval only if it is consistent with the following specific criteria:

- the tree is causing obvious physical damage to a structure or paving;
- the tree is impeding the use of active solar technology, such as solar panels; or
- tree removal would allow for thinning and improved health of surrounding trees.

As part of permit review, additional information may be required to prove that one or more of these specific requirements for approval are being met.

5. Is there a tree removal permit fee?

There is no fee to complete a tree removal form to confirm removal of the allotted number of trees allowed to be removed from a single family property. The fee for a tree removal permit – required for removal of trees exceeding your one or five year single family allotment; removal of trees greater than 30 inches; and, for removal of trees on non-single family properties (see below) – is \$240. The \$240 permit fee is due at the time of permit *issuance* – i.e., there is no *application* fee to have your tree removal proposal reviewed by the City. If you are required to get a *retroactive* tree removal permit – that is, if you get an after-the-fact permit for non-emergency tree removal work that has already been completed – then the permit fee is doubled to \$480 in addition to any fines or mitigating actions that may be required as part of code enforcement (see below). Also, there is no permit fee for removal or alteration of a hazard tree.

6. Can any tree be removed from my property?

Certain trees – typically referred to as “protected trees” – are prohibited from consideration for removal with limited exceptions. The most common protected trees include those trees located within a critical area or its associated buffer. Critical areas include streams, wetlands, steep slopes, and landslide hazard areas. Critical areas and buffers are often included within a recorded tract called a Native Growth Protection Easement (NGPE). Removal or alteration of trees – or any native vegetation – located within a critical area, associated protective buffer, or a designated NGPE is strictly prohibited without City approval.

7. How do I know if a tree is located within a critical area, buffer or NGPE or if the tree is otherwise protected?

If your home or other structures on your property have been recently developed, it is likely that all critical areas (streams, wetlands, steep slopes, etc.) and associated buffers have been delineated and recorded on legal documents as a Native Growth Protection Easement (NGPE). However, older developments may not have recent legal documentation of a recorded NGPE. Regardless, removal or alteration of any trees or native vegetation from a critical area or associate buffer is strictly prohibited – whether or not an NGPE has been formally recorded – and it is your responsibility to ensure compliance with this regulation. The City Development Services Department can help you determine if your property contains critical areas and/or buffers where tree removal would be prohibited. Please call 425-837-3100 or visit the Permit Center so that we can assist you by reviewing maps and other resources or by arranging a field visit to review your property.

8. Are all trees regulated and exactly what defines a “tree”?

In general, only trees that have a diameter at breast height (DBH) – i.e., a trunk diameter at 4 1/2 feet above the ground – of 6 inches or greater are regulated as trees in the City of Issaquah. Anything with a DBH smaller than 6 inches can be removed, pruned or altered – as long as it is not located in a critical area or buffer. There are a few exceptions to this rule that you should be aware of. First, when small trees (trees with DBHs smaller than 6 inches) are planted as part of mitigation for tree removal, these

trees cannot be removed or altered until they have grown enough to meet criteria to be defined as a tree (i.e., until they reach 6 inches DBH). The City wants trees that are planted as mitigation to be protected until they actually become a regulated tree. Second, trees with multiple leaders at breast height (4 1/2 feet above the ground) may have a leader that is smaller than 6 inches and yet still be regulated as a tree. This is because trees with multiple leaders use the *average* leader diameter – the additive total diameter of all leaders divided by the number of leaders – measured at 6 inches above the point where the leaders digress. (And while we are discussing DBH and trees, please remember that all Landmark Trees – trees with a DBH greater than 30 inches – require an approved tree removal permit for removal or alteration.)

9. What about hazard trees?

Many exceptions to the City of Issaquah's tree regulations are provided for hazard trees. However, these exceptions are only allowed if a City Arborist, or another International Society of Arboriculture-certified arborist, confirms that a tree meets criteria to be defined as a hazard tree. In general, a tree will only be designated as a hazard tree if it has a confirmed defect and has the potential to hit a susceptible target (e.g., people or buildings). Removal of hazard trees requires a permit, and coordination with the City is required prior to removal in order to confirm that a tree meets hazard tree criteria. This required coordination is initiated the same as other tree removal requests – with the tree removal form. Simply indicate on the form that the request pertains to a hazard tree. If a tree is confirmed as being hazardous, the permit fee is waived.

10. Can hazard trees be removed from critical areas?

One of the City's top priorities is to minimize the risk associated with hazard trees – even hazard trees located in critical areas or associated buffers. However, complete removal of a hazard tree located in a critical area or associated buffer is typically not allowed. Instead, the tree is converted to a "habitat snag" by cutting the tree at the highest point possible that still eliminates a tree's hazard risk. The lower portion of the tree remains in place as a habitat snag to provide habitat value for fish and wildlife. In addition, the upper portion of the tree is usually left on the ground to provide extra habitat value. Also, in order to compensate for the loss in habitat value, additional tree plantings in the critical area and/or buffer may be required as mitigation.

11. What about emergency situations?

The City recognizes that emergency situations may arise that require a rapid response and immediate removal of imminently hazardous trees. This is certainly allowed, but it is asked that as much documentation as possible of the removed/altered trees be recorded – digital photos are most helpful – so that permits, as necessary, can be issued retroactively and tracking of removed trees can be completed. If a permit is required for removal of a hazardous tree as part of an emergency action, then the permit fee is waived.

12. Do hazard trees count toward my one and five year tree allowances?

Removal of hazard trees does not count toward a single family one and five year exempted tree allotment as long as the removed/altered trees are confirmed to be hazardous by either the City Arborist or by another International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) certified arborist. Except in emergency situations, confirmation of a hazard tree's status must be completed by an ISA-certified arborist *before* a tree is removed and be confirmed by the City as part of the tree removal permit process (remember – there is no permit fee for the removal of a confirmed hazard tree).

13. How is tree removal on non-single family properties handled?

Removal of trees that are not associated with single family residences follows an entirely different process based on a project's approved landscape plan. Managed properties – such as apartment complexes, condominiums, and retail facilities – are generally landscaped in accordance with a project landscape plan that is approved by the City when the project is first developed. Tree removal is allowed or disallowed based on a proposal's consistency with the original landscape plan. In general, if a tree is proposed for removal, then a replacement tree is required in the same location consistent with the original landscape plan. In cases where an original landscape plan has not been developed or cannot be located tree removal requests are evaluated based upon consistency with a facility's installed landscaping. A tree removal permit with the full \$240 permit fee is required for all tree removals on non-single family properties.

14. What if I need to remove trees to make way for a home expansion or other development project?

Tree removal regulations in general are not applicable to active development projects. Once an applicable permit application is received for a proposed development project – including proposals for single family home development or expansion – necessary tree removal is reviewed as part of the permit application by the Development Services Department. At this point tree *removal* requirements do not apply, but the City's tree *retention* requirements must be met as part of the development proposal. In general, City of Issaquah tree retention regulations for new developments require that 30% of the total combined DBH for all significant trees located within a project's developable site area be retained for single family, duplex, short plat, or subdivision developments; and 25% be retained for all other development types including commercial and multifamily developments. A planner can assist you in meeting and understanding tree retention requirements once a development proposal application is filed with the City.

15. What if I want a tree removed from a City ROW or public property?

The City of Issaquah will remove hazard and nuisance trees from city rights of way and public properties if a tree's hazard risk (or nuisance potential) is confirmed by the City Arborist or other ISA certified arborist. Once a tree has been confirmed as needing to be removed – or altered to eliminate hazard risk – the City's Public Works Operations Department prioritizes tree removal actions based on the degree of associated risk. Thus, trees which have a high degree of associated risk are slated for removal first and trees causing a minor nuisance may be placed at the end of a prioritized list. If a resident wants to personally take responsibility for removing a ROW or other public tree that has been approved for removal, the Public Works Operations Department may allow residents to pay for and conduct the removal on public property. To request review of presumed hazard or nuisance tree located on City property, please call the Permit Center at 425-837-3100.

16. What if I want a tree removed from my neighbor's property?

City personnel generally try to stay out of disagreements pertaining to trees that potentially affect multiple private properties (e.g., trees on shared boundaries, neighbor trees with roots or branches that reach adjacent properties, etc.). Such disputes are civil matters between private entities. The City will assist homeowners to help them understand their rights and responsibilities in regard to the City tree regulations, but it is a private party's best interest to work amicably with others to minimize hazard risk while keeping Issaquah green.

17. Are there other regulations pertaining to trees aside from tree removal restrictions?

As mentioned above, new developments must meet tree retention requirements that govern which trees can and cannot be removed when a project is built. In addition, the City limits the manner in which tree pruning and tree maintenance can be conducted. In general, tree topping – radical removal of the canopy of a tree – is prohibited in the City of Issaquah. This pruning regulation prohibits removal of more than 25% of a tree’s canopy during any one pruning event.

18. What should I do if I think trees are being removed illegally?

Illegal tree removal should be reported either to the City Development Services Department at 425-837-3100 or directly to the City Code Compliance Officer at 425-837-3107.

19. What are the penalties for illegally removing trees?

City code allows for the levying of large fines in response to unpermitted tree removal activities. In addition, unpermitted tree removal may result in required mitigation such as replanting and restoration of disturbed areas. For minor unpermitted tree removal activities – where removal was conducted without malicious intent – a resident will be required to meet all permit requirements and pay a \$480 permit fee (double the typical \$240 permit fee) required for retroactive (after the fact) tree removal permits.

For further information see our page about [trees](#) on the [City’s Website](#), contact the [Development Services Department](#) at 425-837-3100, or send an email to TreeQ@issaquahwa.gov.