



Christmas Tree Selection & Care

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The time is coming when many of us will go searching for one of the most visible and treasured symbols of the holidays: the Christmas tree.

The idea of decorating trees for Christmas began in Germany several hundred years ago. German immigrants brought the tradition to the United States in the mid-1800s. In 1851, the first Christmas tree sales lot appeared in New York City. National Agricultural Statistics Service data indicate almost 21 million trees were cut in 2002 (latest year available) in the United States. Commercial tree farms numbered about 22,000 over 447,000 acres. Christmas tree farmers received \$506 million in sales in 2004 (http://www.nass.usda.gov/census/census02/volume1/us/st99_2_035_036.pdf).

Purchasing a tree

Tree lots

The most common and most visible place to buy a Christmas tree is the temporary retail lot. Often, these are on busy street corners or in parking lots of malls or department stores. They may be run by non-profit groups as fund-raisers. Tree lots offer convenience for city dwellers who may not have easy access to cut-your-own tree farms or forests. Trees in temporary lots may be more expensive than at other stores.

Retail outlets

Other retail stores also sell Christmas trees. Garden centers, nurseries, discount stores, grocery stores, and hardware stores may sell a variety of trees for the holidays. Prices may be lower than in a temporary lot. Plus, garden centers and nurseries may offer greater cultivar selections.

Cut-your-own

Some people may be lucky enough to live close to a cut-your-own Christmas tree farm. Trees are grown in rows, and customers can walk through and choose the perfect tree. Many times, tree farm employees will be available to help cut the tree, take it to the check-out area, and load it for transporting home. Many sizes and types of trees will be available at a cut-your-own farm.

In the Rocky Mountain West, the National Forest Service will often open sections of national forest land for people to cut their own trees. Permits are always required and are more affordable than commercial vendors. There won't be as large a variety of sizes and types of trees, though, as found on cut-your-own farms.

Tree cutting by the customer, either on a tree farm or in a permitted national forest area, has several advantages. First, fresh air and exercise are benefits of walking through a farm or forest. Second, trees will be less expensive than those in retail lots. Third, the tree is guaranteed to be fresh.

Mail order

More and more people are buying items from mail order or online catalogs. Today, Christmas trees can also be ordered from a catalog or online; however, the convenience carries a high price. The exact size and type of tree can be ordered and will be delivered directly to the front door.

Living trees

Many would like to enjoy a tree at Christmas time to plant outside later. This type of tree will either be in a large container or will have the root ball

wrapped (balled-and-burlapped) so it doesn't fall apart. In Wyoming, living trees are not highly recommended because it can easily be four months or more between Christmas and tree-planting time in the spring. For this to work, put the tree in a cool room for no more than five days. The tree must be kept from "waking up" from its dormant state. After Christmas, the tree should be placed, still dormant, in a protected area outdoors to avoid freezing injury until it's time to plant. Mulch around the container or root ball will help keep moisture in. The tree will need to be watered several times between Christmas and planting.

Selecting a tree

Location in the home

Before buying a Christmas tree, measure the space where the tree will go. Most ceilings are tall enough for a 7-foot-tall tree. Cathedral-type ceilings will accommodate a much larger tree, but the price tag will also be hefty.

Pick a spot where the tree will be away from fireplaces, wood stoves, or other heat sources. Extra heat will dry the tree out, shorten its life span, and increase the danger of fire.

Tree types

Many types of evergreen trees are grown for Christmas tree sales. Some of the favorites are these:

Firs – Douglas, Balsam, and Fraser are common. Firs generally hold on to their needles very well and can be quite fragrant. Their needles are also soft and not prickly.

Pines – Scotch, White, and Austrian are favorites. Pines also hold their needles very well and are very fragrant.

Spruces – Colorado blue is the most common. Blue spruces won't hold onto their needles as well as firs or pines. The blue-gray color is an advantage with this tree, but not all blue spruces are blue.

Cedars or junipers – These are not as common as firs, pines, and spruces. They can be prickly but their aroma is an attraction.

Check the tree. Once a tree has been picked out, check it for freshness. Bend a few needles. If they spring back without breaking, the tree is fresh. If they are brittle and break, look for another tree.

Shake the tree a little or gently bump it on the ground a time or two. Don't worry if a few brown needles from the inside of the tree fall off. That's normal. But, if lots of green needles drop off the tree, the tree is not fresh.

Check the cut end of the tree. Sap on the stump should be sticky and moist. If it is hard or caked, the tree may not be fresh.

Stand back and look at the whole tree's color. Depending on the tree type, the color should be deep green (most firs, pines, some spruces) or blue-gray (blue spruce).





At home

Cut off one to two inches of the trunk to expose fresh wood. Put the tree in a bucket of water and keep it in a cool, shady place for several days. This will encourage the tree to take up water. Check the water level in the bucket every day and add more as needed. A second cut may be required when placing the tree in the home.

Bring the tree inside and put it in a tree holder or stand with a water capacity of at least one quart - larger is better. Check the water every day and add plain tap water as needed. It is not necessary to put any plant food or preservative in the water. Some preservatives may be dangerous to young children or to family pets. Fresh tap water, and plenty of it, is all the tree needs.

If the tree uses all the water in the reservoir and starts to drop needles, the trunk should be re-cut. This won't be easy but it is the only way to keep more needles from dropping.

For further information, contact your local county office of the University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service.

See also: <http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/forestry/420-641/420-641.html>.

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Tree disposal

Many cities will pick up Christmas trees after the holidays. City employees then typically chip them into mulch. The mulch will then be used in city plantings such as parks and gardens. Sometimes, cities will make the mulch available to citizens to use in their own yards. Some types of wood may contain substances toxic to herbaceous plants. Make sure to compost the chipped Christmas tree wood before using as mulch.

Some other ways to dispose of a Christmas tree include cutting it up for firewood, putting it in the yard and hanging suet or bird feeders from it, or chopping it into smaller pieces to use as mulch. Avoid burning needles, as they are quite flammable and can catch other materials on fire.

Another way to use an old Christmas tree is to lop off the branches and weave them over perennial beds for additional protection. Remove the branches from the perennial bed in mid-spring to allow the perennials underneath to properly emerge.