

Considering a living Christmas tree? Here's what you should know

In a few short months, Christmas trees will be on many of our minds. For those who celebrate Christmas, it's time for an annual decision: Should I put up an artificial tree or bring a natural tree indoors?

Some Wyoming families head to the mountains to cut a tree for the holiday. Others may decorate a living tree and then plant it the following growing season. In recent years, a third natural tree option has emerged. For folks who don't like the idea of cutting down a tree or don't have room to plant a living one in their landscape, some nurseries now offer tree rentals.

Preserving winter dormancy

Whether rented or purchased, a Christmas tree destined for use in a landscape must remain dormant.

Like hibernating animals, many plants become dormant as winter approaches. While seasonal changes are more visible in the changing colors and dropped leaves of deciduous trees, conifers also enter a dormant state.

Once a dormant tree is warmed to a certain level, especially over several days, its system will attempt to come out of dormancy. If left in typical household temperatures or inside a heated garage for more than about five days, sap begins to flow from the roots and larger woody portions of the tree to the tips of the branches.

If that happens, the buds break dormancy and start the spring growth process, making the tree much more susceptible to damage from winter conditions. In Wyoming, trees moved outdoors into winter weather after coming out of dormancy are at risk of freezing or thawing damage and wind desiccation.

To prevent active growth, a living tree should spend only a few days indoors. While indoors, it should be kept in cooler spaces away from heating systems and wood-burning stoves. In addition to warming the plant and potentially breaking dormancy, these heat sources also dry out the tree's needles.

By bringing the tree inside within two days of the holiday celebration and returning it to the outdoors just a day or two after the holiday, you can help preserve its winter dormancy.

Tree rentals

Living tree rental programs typically deliver the live tree to your home in time for the holiday. After the holiday, the rental company picks up the tree, ensuring it remains dormant for the winter season.

Renting a tree is much more likely to prevent the tree from coming out of winter dormancy. This is because the tree only experiences warm indoor temperatures for a few days rather than the whole holiday



Photo by David Keto.

season. The rental company will most likely schedule tree drop-off and pick-up times conducive to maintaining the tree's dormant state. Renters only have to remember the drop-off and pick-up dates and times.

The rented trees can then be sold for planting the following season or kept for next year's seasonal rentals until they become too large to easily move in and out of a home setting.

Before moving your tree outside, take advantage of the warm indoor temperatures and give it a good drink of water.

Once moved back outdoors, the tree should be placed in a protected location out of the wind. It will also benefit from additional shade on the north or northeast side of a house or other structure. After the ground thaws, plant the tree.

If you're considering a living tree for this year's holiday celebrations, now is the time to look into the options available in your community. Before making a decision, find out if you'll need to purchase a tree that can be planted in your landscape or if living trees are available for rent nearby.

Happy holidays!

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Donna Hoffman is a UW Extension horticulture educator based in Natrona County and a tree lover from way back. She has not yet used an artificial tree in her home and dreams of one year cutting a Christmas tree on Christmas Eve and keeping it alive until Twelfth Night. She can be reached at (307) 235-9400 or dhoffman@natronacounty-wy.gov.

Cut Trees

If you choose to cut your Christmas tree in a national forest, you'll need to purchase a permit ahead of time, either online or in person. Christmas tree harvest is permitted only in certain areas of the forest.

When cutting your tree, observe the following guidelines provided by the US Forest Service at <https://bit.ly/usfs-xmas-tree-permit>. Failure to comply with these guidelines is a violation.



Photo courtesy of Brooke Ortel.

- Each permit is for one tree.
- Sales are final and non-refundable.
- A permit expires on the last day of the calendar year it was purchased.
- Attach the permit to the trunk of the tree as soon as it is cut down and before leaving the cutting area.
- Transport the tree so the permit is clearly visible from outside your vehicle.
- Don't top trees by leaving the lower part of the tree standing. Leave a stump less than 6 inches and cut below the lowest live limb.
- Use boughs from the lower section of the tree you cut, not from other live trees.
- Do not cut trees greater than 20 feet in height.
- Do not cut trees that are more than 6 inches in diameter at the stump.
- Up to five Christmas tree permits may be purchased by any one household in a calendar year.

For more information, contact a local US Forest Service office or visit <https://bit.ly/usfs-xmas-tree-permit>. As with any winter expeditions, make sure to plan for winter conditions and let others know where you are going before you leave.

Remember, cut Christmas trees require care to look their best through the holiday season. For tips on how to select and care for cut trees, visit <https://bit.ly/xmas-tree-care>.