

Christmas Tree Selection & Safety

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Christmas trees have been part of traditional European celebrations for centuries. Immigrants brought this tradition to America. Today, the U.S. Christmas tree industry, made up of many local growers, produces these green products that beautify millions of homes during the holidays. For those who enjoy a fresh green tree during this special time, a few simple considerations will help to make this splendid decoration both attractive and safe.

First, selecting a tree depends on the types and species of trees available. Christmas tree growers market their products in a number of ways. Trees may be produced wholesale and sold to buyers in bulk quantities to be sold in distant cities. These wholesale trees are usually cut and transported by the growers. Tractor-trailer loads of trees can be seen on the interstates in November and December.

Other growers retail the trees they produce. Choose-and-cut operations allow buyers to visit the tree farm, select their trees, and cut them. Some retailers cut the trees and sell them at local lots. Still other growers sell balled and burlapped trees to folks who want a live tree that they can plant after the holidays. These trees are dug from the soil with their root systems intact and bundled in burlap cloth to keep the roots moist.

A survey conducted last year by the Appalachian Hardwood Center (operated by WVU Extension and Division of Forestry) found that two-thirds of the trees grown in West Virginia were sold wholesale at an average price of \$15 per tree. In contrast, the per-tree selling prices of the remaining trees (sold at retail) averaged \$23 for choose-and-cut trees, \$29 for balled and burlapped ones, and \$41 for those purchased on retail lots.

When selecting a tree for your home, it is likely you will be buying either from a choose-and-cut farm or a retail lot. Apart from selecting a tree with a pleasing appearance, the key feature to consider is its

freshness. If you cut your own tree, the tree will be as fresh as you can get. Still, when you get the tree home, put it into its stand and water it. Check the water level frequently in the first week and refill the water reservoir when needed.

For trees purchased on a lot, check the freshness by asking the salesperson when the trees were cut. Next, grab a branch about 6 inches from the tip and gently let the needles run through your hand as you pull outward. The needles should be flexible. Dry, brittle needles indicate that the tree has been without water for some time and should not be chosen.

Needle retention, the amount of time the needles are expected to cling to the branches, varies by species and the freshness of the tree. Scotch pine, white pine, and firs have good needle retention. Spruces, while beautifully shaped and otherwise excellent Christmas trees, tend to lose their needles faster. It is especially important to keep these trees well watered.

Real Christmas trees can burn if they are dry and if there is an ignition source. To ensure that the decorated tree is protected from fire, keep the tree away from heat source, like fireplaces, radiators, and heater vents, which tend to dry out the needles. Keep candles and any other open flames well away from the tree. Test any lights you plan to hang on the tree; replace strings of lights that flicker or have worn or frayed insulation. Finally, do not leave the lighted Christmas tree unattended.

Christmas trees can be a source of immense pleasure during the holidays. Their fragrance adds to the ambience and festivity of the season. By buying and maintaining a fresh and flexible tree—and following a few simple safety considerations—you will enjoy your tree throughout the holidays.

For more information on Christmas trees and choose-and-cut locations, call Ed Grafton, president of the West Virginia Tree Growers Association, at 304-765-3014.