



Christmas Tree! Oh Christmas Tree!

The time has come to purchase a Christmas tree. Several choices must be made to select the correct tree. After the purchase, Christmas trees should be properly located and maintained for freshness and safety. Finally, after Christmas there are several options to dispose of the tree.

Selecting a Tree

First, let's look at selecting a tree. You can choose a short- or long-needle evergreen. Common short-needle Christmas trees are Norway spruce, balsam fir, and Fraser fir. Norway spruce has sharp pointed needles that will only hang on the cut tree for 1-12 weeks but are relatively cheap. Balsam and Fraser firs have the advantage of nice smell and rounded needles that will stay on the cut tree for months but are relatively expensive. Occasionally you may find Canadian hemlock, Douglas fir or blue spruce Christmas trees, which are also short needles.

Common long-needle Christmas trees are white pine and Scotch pine. White pine has soft needles in bundles of five, with flexible branches. Scotch pine has stiff, sharp needles in bundles of two on stiff branches. Thus, Scotch pine can hold heavier ornaments. On occasion, you may also find red pine for sale.

Buying a Tree

There are several different ways to buy Christmas trees. Most people buy their tree at a lot. They were previously cut and hauled to the sales lot for the customer. Buyers must now check trees to make sure they are fresh and have flexible, green needles. First, stand the tree up and check for shape and holes on all sides. Your potential Christmas tree should be shaken vigorously and hit against the ground to see if any dried green needles fall off. Old brown needles will fall out of the tree but should be of

no concern. The green needles are what need to be checked. If green needles fall, look for a fresh tree.

To avoid dried-out trees, you may want to go to a "choose & cut" Christmas tree farm. Here you can easily view standing trees in the field. You also will know your tree is fresh.

Living Christmas trees have much to offer. Enjoy them indoors over the holidays decked out with ornaments. Then plant them outside where they can serve over the years as pleasant reminders of this special season. Evergreens provide a special touch in the home landscape, and live Christmas trees usually transplant successfully when bought from a reputable tree farmer who has previously root pruned the tree. With root pruning the longer roots are cut off with a shovel, and that permits new roots to grow inside the remaining rootball. Since most trees suitable for this purpose eventually reach heights of 40 to 60 feet, consider where you will plant it.

Some other tips on buying and caring for a living tree are:

Selection - Shop early. Look for a tree that appears in good vigor, is nicely shaped and of manageable size. Large trees (over 7 feet tall) will be harder to handle and are more prone to transplant shock.

Care - Leave the tree outside until you're ready to decorate it. If possible, prepare the planting hole before Christmas. Place the tree in the hole, and cover the rootball with a bark mulch until time to bring it inside.

While it's in the house, keep the rootball moist at all times. Place the tree in a large tub or wrap the ball in heavy

plastic so that it can be watered without getting the floor wet. An antidesiccant spray on the needles to reduce moisture loss and needle drop will also help. These are available from garden centers and are easy to apply. Keep the tree indoors no longer than seven to ten days - less than that if possible, especially if the house is fairly warm.

Planting - Weather permitting, plant the tree outdoors right after Christmas. If this isn't possible, keep it in a cool basement or garage until you can get it into the ground.

Set the tree at the same level at which it was growing before. Backfill the hole with topsoil mixed with peatmoss to give the tree a good start. Stake it for the first growing season to provide support until the roots become established. A generous layer of mulch will help keep the soil ball moist and reduce damage for hard freezes.

Caring for the Cut Tree

Whether you buy at a sales lot or a choose and cut, two steps are very important when you get the tree home. The first step should be to saw off the bottom 1-3 inches of the stem on a slanted cut. Second, immediately place the tree in your stand and add water above the new slanted cut. Water must be maintained above the cut stem at all times to keep the tree fresh.

Safety

Selecting the spot to place the tree in your home is important. Stay away from heat vents, open fireplaces, electrical appliances, lights, etc. Decorate with low-watt, low-heat Christmas lights. Check all electrical wires for cracked sockets and worn or frayed wires. **Never** place a lighted candle near your Christmas tree.

Other safety precautions are:

- ❖ Make sure your tree is well supported.
- ❖ Don't operate electric trains, toys, etc., under the tree. A single spark can lead to disaster.

- ❖ Don't overload one outlet with too many extension cords.
- ❖ Keep wood, paper, and cloth decorations and ornaments away from lights.

Disposal of Tree

How can you dispose of your tree after Christmas? Many people use the trees to help wildlife. Discarded trees are a favorite of cardinals, wrens, chickadees, various native sparrows, juncoes, and other species of songbirds, as well as rabbits, squirrels, and quail.

The discarded tree offers them protection from predators, wind, and snow. If you locate the tree close to a bird feeder, it will serve as a windbreak where songbirds can rest and feed. It's best to take the tree to an area already used by wildlife. Tie the tree to a stake in a leaning position to provide maximum shelter. Several trees tied together make even better cover.

You can even decorate the tree with a holiday feast for the wildlife. Use strands of popcorn, suet bags, or peanut balls.

If you're interested in fish, you can convert the discarded Christmas tree into a fish shelter. Simply attach a large rock or concrete block to the tree and submerge it in shallow water of ponds and lakes. Both large and small fish will use the tree for cover, making it a good spot to fish in the spring.

Christmas trees can also be cut into short (6-12") sections and used as mulch around shrubs and trees in your yard. Larger limbs and the main stem can be disposed of with other yard waste.

Selecting and buying a good Christmas tree can be fun when you know what you want for your home. Knowing you have a well-supported, safely decorated tree can bring peace of mind. A well-decorated tree will be a thing of pride and joy in your home. Finally, the tree can help wildlife or become mulch to better your quality of life.