

INSIDE GRUNDY COUNTY
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Today's column is about selecting a fresh Christmas tree and is a reprint of the column I wrote last year. Harvesting a live Christmas tree has been a tradition my wife, kids, and I have followed for several years. Not only does this help build family memories as we embark on a mission to find that perfect tree, but it also assures us of a fresh tree. If you prefer to harvest your own tree, you can find nearby Christmas tree farms by checking out the following website: <http://www.agriculture.state.ia.us/christmastree.asp>.

When a precut tree is purchased, it is not as easy to be sure of the freshness. Here are some tips to keep in mind as you make your choice: be aware that some species of trees drop their needles quicker than others. For instance, spruces drop their needles the quickest, firs will drop them somewhat slower, and pines hang on to their needles the longest. Scotch and red pines tend to retain their needles somewhat longer than white pine.

A healthy green color usually indicates that the tree is fresh. Scotch pines have a natural yellow tinge. Some producers will spray these trees with a non-toxic green colorant.

Fresh trees will have a fragrant odor. Be sure to check the bottom of the tree for stickiness, which is another indicator of the tree's freshness. The tree should also have a straight trunk, at the base, of at least five to six inches to facilitate placement in the stand.

Needles should be relatively pliable. The needles on trees that have been cut for some time will be more brittle and will break more readily. Try the bounce test: few if any needles should drop from a fresh tree.

The branches should be strong enough to support the lights and decorations without much sagging or breaking. Remember Charlie Brown's Christmas tree?

Once you have your tree home and are ready to put it in the tree stand, you will want to make two diagonal cuts on the bottom approximately one inch above the original cut. This will help ensure continued water uptake while the tree is in the house. Check the water level in your tree stand daily and keep it full. A tree may use up to one quart of water per day in the house.

Locate your tree away from warm air vents, fireplaces, radiators, television sets or other heat sources. It is recommended that a fresh tree not be left in the home any longer than three weeks. The longer the tree remains in the house the more flammable it becomes.

If you have any questions, please call the Grundy office of ISU Extension at 319-824-6979.