Selecting and Maintaining Your Natural Christmas Tree

By Jesse A. Randall

Consumers spend about 1.01 billion dollars for approximately 25 million natural Christmas trees sold in the United States each year. For that money, customers want attractive trees that retain their needles and vigor and are relatively safe. The following information includes a number of suggestions and precautions a consumer should consider.

Selecting the Tree

Before selecting an individual tree, a consumer should recognize differences among species in needle-holding capacity. In general, spruces drop their needles the quickest. Firs drop them somewhat slower and pines retain their needles the longest with Scotch and red pine having longer needle retention times than white pine.

When selecting among individual trees, there are a number of quick, simple tests you can apply to the product:

Color- A healthy green color usually indicates that the tree is fresh. The most notable exception to this rule is Scotch pine, which has a natural yellow tint. To give the trees more consumer appeal, producers often spray them with a non-toxic green colorant which has the added benefit of reducing moisture loss while in your home.

Odor- Fresh trees have a fragrant odor.

 Butt end- A freshly cut tree will have a stick surface with resin that will easily transfer to your hands when touched. A tree should have a straight butt of at least five to six inches to facilitate placement in the stand.

 Needles- The needles on a fresh tree are relatively pliable; those on a tree that has been cut for a considerable amount of time are more brittle and break easily. Bounce the tree butt lightly on the ground. Few, if any, living needles will drop from a fresh tree.
**Branches** - The branches should be strong enough to support lights and decorations without extensive breaking or sagging. White pine branches will sag more than scotch or red pine when heavy ornaments are placed towards the ends of the branches.

**Care of the Tree at Home**

*Storing* - The tree should not be stored where it is subject to direct sunlight, wind, or heat. All three of these will accelerate drying and needle drop. A suitable storage site is in a cool, moist area protected from the sun and wind, such as a basement or garage. It is also advisable to make a fresh cut ½ to 1 inch above the original cut perpendicular to the stem and then two diagonal cuts on the butt end. Immediately put the butt in a pail of water if the tree is to be stored for a number of days. Such action will facilitate water uptake and will keep the tree fresh during the storage period.

*Putting the tree in the stand* - If the tree has sat out of water for 12 hrs it is advisable to redo the two diagonal cuts on the butt end approximately 1/2 inch above the original cuts, just prior to placing the tree in the stand, will help ensure continued water uptake while the tree is in the house. It is very important to keep the tree stand filled with water—check the water level daily! A tree may uptake one to two quarts of water per day in a warm room.

*Nutrient additives* - Nutrient additives do not prolong the shelf life of a cut Christmas tree and should not be used. The nutrients may actually increase bacterial growth which can slow water uptake in cut trees.

*Location* - The tree should be located away from warm air vents, fireplaces, radiators, television sets, or other heat sources.

*Fire protection* - The most effective fire preventives are to buy a locally sourced, freshly-cut tree and keep it well supplied with fresh water. In addition, locate the tree away from sources of heat that will increase drying of the tree. To find a local Christmas tree farm follow the link to the Iowa Christmas Tree Growers Association and utilize their “Find a Farm” locator. [http://www.iowachristmastrees.com/](http://www.iowachristmastrees.com/)

The longer the tree remains in the house, the more flammable it becomes. A fresh tree should not remain in the home longer than three weeks. Keeping the tree hydrated with clean water is the single best preventative measure against fire.

**Disposal of the tree**

Disposing of a used Christmas tree is often a serious problem, but many towns now offer free removal on designated days as part of their recycle and refuse pickup. These trees are oftentimes mulched for future municipal and private uses. Burned your Christmas tree in your fireplace is not advised as “unseasoned” conifer material can lead to creosote buildup and chimney fires. Many homeowners leave their tree in the yard near their birdfeeders as a roost for the birds during the remaining winter months. Lastly, check with your local county conservation board or sportsman’s club to see if anyone is taking trees to build sinkable fish structures. Normally these conservation groups will accept local drop off trees throughout the winter.

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