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A Weekly Column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

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Making Memories with the Christmas Tree

Beth Ellen Doran, Iowa Master Gardener and Beef Program Specialist

Things change, but a lasting tradition is the Christmas tree. While artificial trees have removed some of the challenge, for me, a favorite Christmas memory is picking out the “perfect” tree and putting it up.

Now this is not to say, I haven’t learned a lot from experience and made my share of mistakes. For instance, there was the year the base of the tree was too big to fit the stand. Another year, the base was too small so we added wood blocks to fill the gap. And, then there were two years of engineering feats – adding blocks under the legs of the stand to compensate for the crooked trunk and the best one of all - wiring the tree to the curtain rod to prevent it from toppling over!

To prevent potential problems, I’d like to share some tips in selecting your tree. First, pick out a tree that fits your holiday season. Spruces will drop their needles the quickest followed by firs and pines, respectively. Of the pines, Scotch and red pines retain their needles longer than white pine.

You can also perform some simple tests to determine freshness:

- Look for a healthy green color (Scotch pines have a natural yellow tint)
- Select a tree having a fragrant odor
- Check for a sticky resin on the butt end that transfers easily to your hands
- Feel the needles to see if they are pliable
- Bounce the tree lightly on the ground to see how many needles fall off
- Examine the tree for strong branches

The most important thing to maintain a fresh Christmas tree is to make sure it can take up water. Make a cut $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1-inch above the original cut perpendicular to the stem and then two diagonal cuts on the butt end just prior to putting it in the stand. Check the water level daily as the tree may uptake 1-2 quarts of water daily. Do NOT let the tree dry out.



The next thing is to put on Christmas music and enjoy some cocoa and cookies while decorating the tree with lights and your favorite ornaments. You will probably finish decorating much sooner than those lighting the 75-foot Norway spruce with 50,000 lights at the Rockefeller Center. Hmm, I wonder if they have to block or wire their tree upright!

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