Hello, and welcome to the small farms podcast, a production of the small farms program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life.

In this episode I visit with Aaron Steil consumer horticulture specialist with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Today we are talking about cut trees for Christmas. I'm Olivia Hanlon small farms extension specialist, and we hope you enjoy the show. Aaron, welcome. We're glad to have you joining us today.

Yeah, thanks for inviting me back.

Aaron, I think it's maybe been a little bit since we've had you on so let's start with the typical quick reminder for everyone out there on what it is you do at your role here in Iowa State and maybe a little bit about what you've been up to lately.

Yeah. As consumer horticulture extension specialist, I work with the 100 County Extension offices across the state of Iowa to answer all of the home gardening questions that come to the extension office every day. And lately I've been preparing a lot of information for a lot of those
plants that we have over the holiday season. So holiday cactus and poinsettia and of course cut trees.

Olivia Hanlon 01:29
All right, Aaron, why don't we start with how many types of cut Christmas trees are there? Maybe within Iowa that would be available to most of the folks listening?

Aaron Steil 01:38
Yeah, well, there are dozens of different species that are used as Christmas trees in Iowa. Some of the more popular ones are white pine, Scotch Pine, balsam fir, fraser fir. These trees are popular across the country, especially Balsam and Fraser fir. And so we see those quite often there are a few others too. And then of course, trees that you may see in tree lots are tree farms in other parts of the country that you'd never see here in Iowa. But for the most part, those four tend to be some of the more common ones.

Olivia Hanlon 02:16
Okay, Aaron, why are those four our most common? Well, one of

Aaron Steil 02:21
the big things that people are looking for in a cut tree is needle retention, because nobody likes to vacuum or sweep all that stuff up. And needle retention is heavily influenced by how you care for the tree. But the species also plays a role. So things like fraser fir and balsam fir do a really good job of holding on to their needles. Additionally, they are really great. They have nice stiff branches. So heavy ornaments. And those kinds of things hang on very nicely. So that makes them some of the most popular species to grow in terms of Christmas tree. Others, like the white pine are just lovely looking trees, and many of them have a nice fragrance too.

Olivia Hanlon 03:03
Okay, Aaron, if folks are out there trying to pick out a tree, what's the best way for folks to decide what type of tree they should get.

Aaron Steil 03:12
So you have to start with understanding where you're going to use it and how big of a tree you want. These trees always look smaller in the lot than they will in your house. So making sure that you bring a tape measure with you and you understand the size tree that you can have both in height, but also width. And the other thing to keep in mind is the size of the trunk diameter, making sure it'll fit into your tree stand because it's not really possible to shave the trunk down and still have a healthy cut tree long term. So you want to make sure that it fits
that way as well. And then when you're out picking out a tree assuming you find one that fits all those size requirements, you'll want to look for freshness. That's one of the most important factors now at a, you cut farm freshness is pretty guaranteed you're literally cutting the tree down, it still will lose some needles, though evergreens lose older interior needles all the time. So don't be surprised if you see some needles fall off of even a tree that you just cut down. But many of the pre cut trees that we'll see in parking lots and at home box stores and stuff like that. Some of those were harvested as much as four weeks ago. And so you'll want to check for freshness and the best way to do that is to feel the tree. The branches should be pliable. They may be stiff, but they're still pliable. The needle should feel pliable as well so that when you touch them, they shouldn't break off or fall off really easily or feel really dry and stiff. And then you can also give it a light tap. So if you pick it up and tap the butt of the trunk down onto the ground, needles will fall off. But if a few fall off then you're great if a whole bunch of them fall off then that would be one to avoid.

Olivia Hanlon 04:57
Okay, Aaron before we decorate are trees is there anything that we need to do to prepare it once we get it inside the house?

Aaron Steil 05:04
Yeah, so you want to get it in a stand, I find it easier to put it in the stand outside. Because it's often easier to do it while it's laying on its side, you don't have to worry about getting it nice and straight up and down. Because you can do that fine tuning once you get it in the house. But before you put the stand on, you want to cut the bottom about inch off of the trunk make a nice flush cut so that I can more effectively pull up water. And then put the stand on. The other thing I like to do is if you can find it, having a nice large garbage bag or plastic bag that you can use after the season is over, to pull up and around the tree so that you can get out of the house without making a big mess. You have to plan for that now to be able to do it in January. But that can be really nice way to help keep things nice and clean. As you're getting ready to move it in, then you're going to move it into the house, get it set up and make sure you add water to the stand as quickly as possible.

Olivia Hanlon 06:02
Aaron, is there a certain amount of time that we should wait once we get in the house before we start putting some of our heavier ornaments on it?

Aaron Steil 06:09
No, they're ready to go as soon as you get them in there. All right.

Olivia Hanlon 06:13
So what are some of the requirements for taking care of our Christmas tree? And how can we make sure it lasts as long as possible? Obviously, water is a factor here. But are there any...
make sure it lasts as long as possible? Obviously, water is a factor here. But are there any maybe myths that people may hear about what you can add to your water, 

Aaron Steil 06:26
There is some of that. The most important thing to keep your tree looking good for the entire holiday season is keeping it well watered. If that is the only thing you do, you will have pretty good success. It's really easy, especially in the first couple of days for that water reservoir to dry out. Keeping it from drying out, always making sure there's water there, you have to check it at least once a day, you'll probably have to add water most days, and making sure that you have a Christmas tree stand that has a nice large reservoir to make that task a little bit easier for you. That's probably the most important thing. Now you'll hear people who do things like add things like Sprite, or sugar, or molasses or aspirin or rusty nails. Like there's all sorts of kind of funny, old wives tales, when it comes to additives to the water to help your Christmas tree last longer. In all reality, good, clean, clear water is the best for the tree. Don't add any of that other stuff. You'll also hear people talking about drilling a hole in the center of the trunk underneath to help like I don't know, increase the surface area or cutting the bottom of the trunk into like a notch or like an inverted V to increase the surface area. And this really doesn't help a whole lot, the whole doesn't work at all, because that's not where water is taken up. And the notch makes the tree more unstable. So it doesn't really help you as much as you would hope.

Olivia Hanlon 07:54
Perfect. Some good tips there, Aaron, and this is going to be a really easy question for you. What can folks do to prevent the chance of a tree once they get those lights on there?

Aaron Steil 08:05
The most important thing is to keep it well watered. And these things are actually quite rare. I think the official statistic is .0004% live Christmas trees are involved in some kind of potential like issue when it comes to fire. And the tree is never the reason for the fire. It's usually electric lights or something nearby like a space heater. But if you keep your tree well watered and keep it healthy, it is a very low fire risk. In fact, there are probably many other things in your home that are a much higher risk.

Olivia Hanlon 08:39
So we should stop watching so many Christmas movies.

Aaron Steil 08:43
It is very dramatic when that happens. It makes for good movies.
Olivia Hanlon 08:48
Oh, Aaron, if someone is thinking about switching from an artificial tree to a real tree, what would you say to convince them to make the switch?

Aaron Steil 08:57
Apart from just how wonderful the smell and the look, the color just all of that is of a real tree versus an artificial one. I think one of the big things that is a little bit of a misconception is that real Christmas trees have a negative impact on the environment. In reality, all Christmas trees are harvested from planted trees on farms. So these aren't trees that people are going out into the woods and removing from natural spaces. They are trees that are planted. And so supporting that industry actually supports more tree planting. The average Christmas tree takes six years to produce some a little bit longer, some a little bit shorter. So you're supporting an industry that's actually planting and maintaining a lot of trees and that natural material will decompose and contribute to the environment when the tree is done. Unlike an artificial plastic tree, which will be around forever. So that I think is a very intriguing and good reason to consider a live tree.

Olivia Hanlon 10:01
Absolutely, Aaron on that note once we've enjoyed our Christmas tree for the season, what are some things that we can do with it? Once we take it outside? How should we dispose of those? Are there any good ways to use those?

Aaron Steil 10:14
Yeah, there are, there are you have a couple options. Most municipalities have a tree collection program, they'll either have a place where you can take it to drop it off, or a collection day from your curb. So that's always an option. But if you can keep it on your property and use it some other way that can be really nice. You can use it as mulch, cutting off the boughs, and laying them over perennial beds to add a little bit of extra protection can be really nice. If you're able to chip it, it can become nice mulch that way as well. You can also put it outside and use it as a wildlife kind of protector and hang, you know, suit feeders or those kinds of things to help feed birds and other wildlife. So that can be a nice fun thing to do with it in January and February. And then in March, maybe you will chip it up and use it as mulch, the one thing you don't want to do with it is burn it, the tree is very dry, even when well cared for. I mean, it's in your house. For some of us, it's going to be in our house for almost eight weeks. So the tree is typically quite dry. And you'll have a lot of popping and crackling and that kind of thing, which can lead to some unintended, you know, embers and sparks flying other places. Additionally, especially if you're using it indoors, well you would be using it indoors, if you're burning it after the holidays. They have a lot of resin in them. And it can cause buildup in your flu, which can lead to of course some major problems. So I don't recommend burning it, but instead using it in some other way like mulch.

Olivia Hanlon 11:44
That's helpful, Aaron thank you.
Okay. All right, Aaron, to wrap us up here. Why don't you share with us your favorite kind of tree and why it's your favorite.

Aaron Steil 11:53
The honestly the first thing that comes to mind is a terrible Christmas tree species actually. But it's a favorite because it reminds me of being a kid. When we were kids, our tree was always the eastern red cedar, which is one of the only evergreens native to all of Iowa. It's not a very attractive tree in the winter turns kind of a brownish red color. It's a terrible tree for hanging ornaments on because all the limbs are floppy. And the top doesn't even have a good like sturdy leader to like put a star on or anything like that. It has a very strong smell, which is sometimes pleasant, but sometimes not depending on like what your opinion is on it, I guess. And it doesn't hold needles very well either. So it makes a huge mess. But the smell in particular, of that tree is something that I will always connect with the holidays because we went out to a pasture and cut it down ourselves and used it as a Christmas tree. And that is a very nice memory. So even the worst species a tree for a Christmas tree still generates some really wonderful kind of memories. And so even though it's terrible tree for for the holidays, it's it is one of my favorites for that reason.

Olivia Hanlon 13:07
You know, Aaron, we always had pasture trees as well. And I am the opposite way. I'm looking forward to a real Christmas tree. Well, thank you so much for sharing this information with us today. Aaron, is there anything that we didn't get covered that you'd like to add in here? Before we go?

Aaron Steil 13:24
You know, I think we covered a lot of the major points, I will add that there's a very nice kind of comprehensive guide to selecting and caring for your Christmas tree available from Iowa State University Extension. And so that can be a great place to and a great resource to use while you're shopping for and caring for that tree.

Olivia Hanlon 13:43
All right, very good. Aaron, we will put that link to that guide in the show notes below so that folks can get easy access to that. And thank you again for joining us and we look forward to having you back in the future.

Aaron Steil 13:56
You're welcome. It's always a pleasure to talk to you.

Olivia Hanlon 13:59
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