

## Christmas Trees

This past weekend, my family and I carried out a long tradition. We loaded up in the Suburban and headed off for the hills to harvest our Christmas tree for the season. For the 48% of Americans that have an artificial tree, you won't need to water them, just give them some TLC and they'll be around a lot longer than we will.

It seems that no symbol is more traditional during the holiday season than the Christmas tree. As a symbol of everlasting life, it is a link to the freshness and fragrance of the forest. Most legends point to the Fir being the traditional type of evergreen, but many have been used over the years. Each year, 34-36 million Christmas trees are sold in America.

But even though the symbol is traditional, each family must choose its own tree from among several options for the holiday. The tree can be artificial or fresh. The secret to satisfaction with your Christmas tree is to make a family decision based on all the options. If the decision is to select a real tree there are a few considerations to keep in mind.

When selecting a real or fresh cut Christmas tree, look for fullness, size, color, as well as safety – freshness and moisture content of a tree. The higher the moisture content of a Christmas tree the lower the fire hazard. Fresh cut trees will tend to have the highest moisture content of real trees. A 1998 study found that of the 32 million real Christmas trees in American's homes, 0.00093% were ignited in home fires.

When considering pre-cut trees the key is to start with as fresh of a tree as possible. You can check for freshness by tamping a tree. If a large number of green needles fall off, that can be a sign of dryness. If you bend the needles and they flex and bend back that is a sign of moisture. If they snap in two as if dry and brittle that can be a sign of dryness. When looking at standing trees, look for flexibility of the limbs and trunk.

Once you get your tree home, make a fresh cut. A fresh cut is necessary to remove any sap that has accumulated on the old cut and limits water uptake by the tree. Once the fresh cut is made place the tree in your stand and add water immediately making sure the entire cut is below the water line. If you do not plan to set the tree up right away, still make the cut and place it in water until you are ready to decorate it. The tree stand itself plays a critical role in maintaining the freshness of your tree. It is common to have a stand that will hold ½ to 1 full gallon of water.

Check the water level in the stand a number of times for the first couple of days. It is not uncommon to use three or four gallons of water in the first couple of weeks. Allowing the water to get below the cut will allow the sap barrier to form and once again limit water uptake by the tree.

Adding chemicals or sugar to the water is not necessary, plenty of good fresh water is the best in trying to maintain the freshness of the tree.

To help slow the drying process, locate the trees away from heat ducts. Keep the tree a safe distance from fireplaces, electric heaters, and other heat sources.

Following the holidays the use of a real Christmas tree is not over. Real trees can be recycled into a number of different uses. Some people place the tree in the backyard and use it as a **winter bird feeder**. The trees also can be chipped and the chips used as **organic mulch** around shrubs and flowers. Other people use Christmas trees to **shore up eroding stream banks**.

Some interesting facts about Christmas trees include:

- The use of evergreen trees to celebrate the winter season occurred before the birth of Christ.
- The first decorated Christmas tree was in Riga, Latvia in 1510.
- Oregon was the leading producer of Christmas trees in 2002 with 6.5 million.
- Christmas trees are grown in all 50 states including Hawaii and Alaska.
- 73 million new Christmas trees will be planted this year.
- In 1856 Franklin Pierce, the 14th President of the United States, was the first President to place a Christmas tree in the White House.
- In 1963, the National Christmas Tree was not lighted until December 22nd because of a national 30-day period of mourning following the assassination of President Kennedy.
- In 1979, the National Christmas Tree was not lighted except for the top ornament. This was done in honor of the American hostages in Iran.
- In 1984, the National Christmas was lit on December 13th with temperatures in the 70's, making it one of the warmest tree lightings in history.
- In 2002, 446,996 acres of land in the United States were in Christmas Tree production.
- An acre of Christmas trees provides for the daily oxygen requirements of 18 people.
- In 2007 the retail market value of the 31.3 million trees purchased at the mean average purchase price of \$41.50.

This time of year is unique in many regards. Make sure you choose your tree wisely and carefully. With a little of attention, a good Christmas tree will last through the season, adding to your enjoyment. With an average of seven to ten years to mature, a good tree has been waiting a long time to come into your home. I wish you all a very Merry Christmas!