

HOW TO BUY A CHRISTMAS TREE

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The tradition of a decorated Christmas tree in the United States may date back to the Revolutionary War, when homesick Hessian troops cut and decorated fir trees as was their German custom. Since then, the Christmas tree, with its forest fragrance and freshness, has come to represent the Yule season. It is the mainstay of both indoor and outdoor holiday decorations.

Today, selecting the perfect Christmas tree is one of the highlights of many families' pre-holiday preparations. Choosing a tree that is "just right" for you will be easier if you know what species you are looking for, the different features that indicate a good tree, and how to select and maintain freshness.



SPECIES

Practically all species of evergreen are used for Christmas trees, although some are more popular and are in greater supply than others. No one species can be considered the best all-around Christmas tree, for each has its own individual characteristics. A short needled fir, the Douglas fir has needles that are attached around the twig instead of in a feather-like arrangement. The needles are short-stalked, soft and pliable and are dark yellow-green or blue-green.

The Scotch Pine, a very fast growing tree, has needles longer than the Douglas fir. The needles grow in clusters of two and are dark blue-green in color, usually twisted, and from 1-1/2 to 2-1/2 inches long. However, within the past several years many varieties have been produced with shorter needles. With proper pruning and trimming the Scotch pine can be made very bushy, which is a desirable characteristic for a Christmas tree. It is a very popular tree partly because it holds its needles longer than many others.

Another holiday favorite and perhaps one of the most sought after Christmas trees is the silvertip. The silvertip also known as a red fir was mentioned in literature written by John Muir, in his observation of the distinct silvertips on the new growth. Silvertips are known for their sturdy, layered branches, attractive greenish-blue color and symmetrical growth.

SELECTING A TREE

A few simple procedures can make the selection of a "perfect" Christmas tree easier:

- Determine where in your home you will display your tree. With this in mind, you will be able to tell what height you will need and whether all four sides must be suitable for display. You should select a tree that is the right height for the space you have chosen for it. Cutting large portions off either end will alter the natural taper of the tree.
- Freshness is an important key when selecting your tree. The needles should be resilient, but not brittle. Run your finger down a branch - the needles should adhere to each twig. Shake or bounce the tree on the ground lightly to see that the needles are firmly attached. If only a few drop off, the tree is fresh and with proper care should retain its freshness indoors throughout the holiday season.
- The limbs should be strong enough to hold ornaments and strings of electric lights and the tree should have a strong fragrance and good green color for the species.

- Check the tree for freshness, cleanness, health and trimmings and be sure it displays the best qualities for the species. Following these steps should insure a healthy, attractive tree, but the care of your tree does not stop here.

CHRISTMAS TREE CARE

If you buy your tree several days before it will be set up and decorated, store it outside. Cut the butt of the tree diagonal about one inch above the original cut-this opens the pores and aids in the absorption of water. Place the butt end in a container of water.

When you bring it into the house, saw the butt again, squaring off the diagonal. This facilitates placing the tree in stand as well as aiding absorption. Keep the butt end of the tree in a container of water the entire time it is in the house. Refill the container daily as the tree requires a lot of water. Sprinkling water on the branches and needles before you decorate the tree will help retain freshness.

Be sure that the base of the tree is well-supported and the tree is placed away from fireplaces, radiators, electric heaters, televisions or any other source of heat.

Open flames, such as lighted candles, should never be used on or near the tree. In addition, never leave your home with the Christmas tree lights still on. The longer the tree is indoors, the more combustible it will become. Check electric light cords for fraying and worn spots that could early lead to fires. Also do not overload the electric circuits and avoid the use of combustible decorations.

Following these care and precaution measures should insure an attractive tree that stays fresh indoors for more than a week and a holiday season free from Christmas tree mishaps.

Please contact the University of California Cooperative Extension at 530-621-5528 or <http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu> with your agricultural questions. Information for this article was collected from the University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources.