

CARING FOR CHRISTMAS TREES

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If you are going to choose a real Christmas tree as the center of your Christmas celebrations, it will require some special care to ensure a pleasant, and not messy, experience.

Selecting a Tree

Cut Trees

For a cut tree, the ideal choice for a really fresh tree is to cut one yourself from a Christmas tree farm. When that is not an option, two ways to check for tree freshness on a tree lot are:

- 1) bend a green needle between thumb and forefinger – if it snaps rather than bends, the tree may be too dry;
- 2) thump the tree stem firmly on the ground once or twice – if brown needles fall out, that is OK, but if green needles fall out, the tree may be too dry.

Note also how trees are stored and displayed on the lot –

- Are they in full sun?
- Are they exposed to wind?
- Are the trees standing upright and separated from each other?
- Are the stems **not** in water?

These are all factors that may increase the chances of the tree needles drying out and falling off. Also, ask the vendor where the trees came from and when they were cut. Frequently, the further the distance traveled, the earlier the trees were cut – some are cut in October. Pay attention to fall



weather patterns, too. A long, mild fall will delay the time the trees go into winter dormancy and basically shut down all their systems. If the trees are cut before they go into dormancy, they probably will be more susceptible to drying out quickly and dropping their needles.

Balled and Burlapped

For a balled and burlapped tree, many of the same points are useful. Check both the size of the root-ball and whether or not it is damp to the touch. Often balled and burlapped trees are displayed in old tires – the root-ball for any tree over 3 feet tall should completely fill the tire. Again, ask where the trees came from and how long ago they were dug – local sources are probably better for freshness and for compatible soil types. If the root-ball is dry, the tree is probably suffering from drought conditions.

For both types of trees, but especially for the living trees, make sure the foliage is wrapped when you transport it, so that air movement across the needles does not cause further drying. If a cut tree is bound with twine or netting, that will be protection enough.

Species Choices

The most commonly grown Christmas tree species in Kentucky are white pine and Scots pine, followed by Douglas-fir, Colorado blue spruce, and Norway spruce. Scots pine has medium length



needles and short, stubby branches and will hold all kinds of ornaments well. White pine has very soft, fragrant foliage and flexible branches, and will not support heavy ornaments well. Douglas-fir and the spruces are more like Scots pine but have very short needles relative to the pines. Fraser fir is the Cadillac of Christmas trees, with a wonderful, pungent odor, but Kentucky does not have the appropriate conditions for its growth. Firs and spruces may be more expensive than pines because they take longer to grow to the same heights. For balled and burlapped trees, the best choices are probably white pine and the spruces for replanting in Kentucky and for greatest beauty in the home landscape.

Home Care

Preparation

For cut trees from a lot, remove another 1 or 2 inches of the stem to allow the pitch or sap to flow. Place the tree in a bucket of warm water (the heat will help get the sap flowing as well as opening up the water-conducting channels in the wood) and store it somewhere out of direct sunlight and wind (e.g., garage, basement, enclosed porch) until ready to put in the house.

For balled and burlapped trees, once you get the tree, dig a hole in your yard where the tree will be planted. The hole should be **at least** two times the width of the root-ball but the **same** depth. Cover the soil you have removed so it doesn't freeze up on you while the tree is in the house. Place the tree's root-ball in a tub or bucket big enough to hold it and store it out of wind and sun for at least two days before going into the house. Mist down the needles, and water the root-ball just enough to get it damp, not wet.

Installation

Place any real tree in a spot where it is away from a heat source – stoves, registers, fireplaces, radiators, etc. There is a tiny (less than one 1,000th of one percent) chance that a Christmas tree (real or artificial) may be flammable, but keeping it away from flame or heat sources reduces that possibility. Limit the hours that electric lights are lit

on the tree – each bulb is a tiny hot spot on the needles. Keep a cut tree watered (use only tree stands that will hold up to a gallon of water) and a living tree damp.

When the cut tree is installed, fill the reservoir of the tree stand with the following solution: 1 cup of corn syrup plus 3 tablespoons of liquid bleach in one gallon of water. Continue to add solution to the reservoir as needed for as long as the tree remains in the house. If this seems like an odd combination of ingredients, here is the explanation (from one of Kentucky's long-time Christmas tree growers): The bleach tends to thin out or remove the sticky pitch from the tree's water-conducting channels and to allow the water to get into the tree. The corn syrup gives the tree a simple carbohydrate source for food, in addition to the fluid of the water. This combination should help the needles stay on your holiday tree.



Live trees should be inside no more than one week.

Removal

After the Christmas season is over, dispose of a cut tree in a responsible manner. More options are becoming available to the Christmas tree consumer. One option is to put the tree out in the backyard with peanut-buttered pine cones or cups and strings of popcorn and cranberries for wildlife food and habitat. In some parts of the state, Christmas trees are recycled as fish habitats in lakes. In many towns and cities, civic organizations or departments of the municipal government set up chipping stations where trees can be brought to be chipped into mulch (often you can take some of the mulch home for your trees or garden, too). If possible, avoid putting the tree in the trash to go to a landfill.

To find a Christmas tree farm near you, visit www.kychristmastrees.com and click the tree farms link.



When a living tree has been enjoyed in the house for a week, return it to a sheltered, but unheated, location as you did before it went into the house. With all the decorations removed, mist the needles down again and make sure the root-ball is still damp. After two or three days, plant the tree, remembering to remove all plastic twine, wire, and burlap from the root-ball. Slightly loosen the soil of the root-ball and use the protected, reserved soil from the hole to fill in around the tree. If temperatures allow, water the tree thoroughly after planting and put mulch (wood chips, sawdust) 2 or 3 inches deep around the tree (but **not** touching the bark of the tree). If there are warm spells during the winter, water the tree again, but otherwise it should just begin growing new needles in the spring.

A real tree can make the whole Christmas tradition memorable, delighting sight, smell, and touch. With appropriate care, it will only enhance your holiday experience.

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