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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

LIVE CHRISTMAS TREES: A SURVIVAL GUIDE

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A live tree can be a wonderful reminder of joyful times for years to come, but it takes special care to move your tree from your living room to your yard. This is a living plant being asked to do something unnatural: live inside a warm house during its dormant season and then go back outside in the cold when we're done with it.

A living tree cannot stay inside for more than 4 to 10 days, depending on temperatures; the warmer the temperature, the less time you can keep it inside. It is important not to let the tree break dormancy. Lowering the temperature to 60 F at night will help. Use only LEDs or fairy lights; C-7s give off too much heat for a living tree. If your holiday traditions will not adapt to this, please don't get a living tree. A cut or artificial tree will work much better for you if you put the tree up the day after Thanksgiving and keep it up until after New Year.

Before you go shopping for a living tree, consider where it will go after Christmas. What evergreen trees will do well in your yard? How large of a tree do you want? Those with city lots may want a dwarf tree, where people who live in the country will have room for a full sized spruce. Also consider your physical abilities- a 6' tree has a root ball that is very heavy. Do you want to wrestle it into your house, and then back out in the cold and plant it?

The decision to have a living Christmas tree is one that is ideally made in fall, because you really should dig the hole at that time, before the ground is frozen. Put the soil you remove from the hole in bags or on a tarp and put it somewhere it won't freeze. Working with a giant ball of frozen soil is not holiday fun. Mulch the hole in the ground to prevent it from freezing.

When you bring the tree home, gradually acclimate it to indoor temperatures. Place it in a garage or enclosed porch, where it's warmer than outside but not as warm as your house. A sudden exposure to 70 F temperatures will cause it to break dormancy, and you want to avoid that. Give the tree three or four days there before bringing it in. This is a good time to check the tree for [Type text]

over-wintering insects and spiders, who will be roused by warm temperatures and may crawl off the tree and become an uninvited guest under your dining table. Spray the tree with an anti-desiccant (Sold under names such as Wilt-Pruf or Cloud Cover) to keep the tree needles from drying out and dropping. This product will also protect the tree from drying winter winds after it is moved outside. An anti-desiccant works great on cut trees, too.

Locate the tree in a cool spot, away from the heating vents. Do not put it in the same room as a wood or pellet stove. Place the pot or ball-and-burlap in a plastic or galvanized bucket and stabilize it with rocks. If the tree is ball-and-burlap, fill the spaces around the ball with mulch so it doesn't dry out. Water initially and as necessary to keep the soil from drying out, but don't allow water to stand in the bucket. Do NOT apply fertilizers or tree preservatives.

After Christmas, reverse the acclimatization, placing the tree in a location that is cool but does not freeze for a few days before planting outdoors. Do not take the tree out to plant if it's very cold or north winds are blowing. If the ground is frozen or the temperatures will be very cold for an extended period, place the tree in a sheltered area and mulch the very heavily before planting when the weather is more agreeable.

If the tree breaks dormancy while it's inside, you're going to be stuck with the tree either in your house or in a greenhouse for the rest of winter. If this happens, place the tree in a very cool spot that gets very bright light, and do not let it dry out. Plant it in spring, after hardening it off.

Laurie Brown is owner of of North Star Farm and teaches classes in plant propagation for University of Idaho Master Gardeners in Bonner County. She has been involved with the Bonner County Master Gardener Program since 1996.

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