



UI Extension Forestry Information Series II

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*This beautiful Christmas tree is a subalpine fir (*Abies lasiocarpa*) from the Idaho Panhandle National Forest.*

Cutting a Wild Christmas Tree and Leaving a Better Forest

Chris Schnepf

For those who want a real Christmas tree, fresher is better. For some, a fresh, real tree means a trip to the woods, but forest-grown trees aren't your only choice for a fresh-cut tree. "U-cut" Christmas tree farms are usually closer to town and have a variety of species to choose from.

But if going to the woods is part of your Christmas tradition, you won't necessarily hurt the forest by cutting a Christmas tree. In fact, cutting the right tree can help the forest!

First, determine where to find the tree. Sometimes people presume everywhere they see forest trees is public forestland. Statewide, the largest portion of Idaho's forests are federal, but that may not be mirrored in your locality. For example, in several northern Idaho counties, the largest portion of forest land is owned by family forest owners. Different ownerships are frequently intermingled, so be sure get permission and maps, so you know whose land you are cutting a tree from. Public agencies and timber companies commonly have a permit system for cutting Christmas trees on forests they manage.

Most agencies also have policies as to which trees you can cut; but there are additional factors to consider in choosing your tree. For example, fire exclusion and selective harvesting have produced much more fir than our forests had historically. As a result, our forests often have more problems with root disease and defoliators. Fortunately, grand fir, subalpine fir (both known as "true firs"), and Douglas-fir are very popular Christmas tree species.

Firs are shade tolerant, so they tend to have comparatively full crowns at high stocking levels. Cutting these species where they are growing within 15 feet of a healthy ponderosa pine, larch, or white pine helps the forest, by giving that growing space to species that are more resilient to insects, disease, drought, and fire.

Even if pine or larch aren't present, cutting a fir within 15 feet of another taller, better-formed tree of the same species gives the remaining tree more nutrients and moisture. On better sites, fir may be growing too fast for the dense crown most people prefer in a Christmas tree. One strategy is to look on poorer quality sites, or stands with more overstory trees. On the latter types of stands, you are also helping the forest by removing trees that ground fires use as a ladder to get up into the canopy and become tree-killing crown fires.



Before putting your tree in the stand, cut 1/2 inch off the base so it will take up water.

When you get the tree home, cut one half inch off the base of the trunk and place it in some water. If you aren't ready to put it in the house yet, put the base in a bucket of water, preferably on the north side of the house or in your garage. Have a merry Christmas!



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