



UI Extension Forestry Information Series II

Alternative Forest Enterprises No. 6

Real Christmas Trees - Made in America!

Yvonne Barkley

Sleigh bells ring, carolers sing, and it's time to deck your halls for the holiday season. And for 30-35 million American families, the centerpiece of their holiday traditions is a real Christmas tree.

Celebrating over 500 years of tradition. The National Christmas Tree Association (NCTA), as well as other entities from all over the world, has officially recognized the year 1510 as the first recorded instance of a decorated real Christmas tree, a tradition born in the city of Riga, Latvia. Since then people all over the world have brought live trees into their homes at this time of year to decorate and enjoy as part of their celebrations and traditions.

There is an on-going and lively debate between folks that prefer real Christmas trees and those that prefer (gasp!) fake trees. Eighty-five percent of the 10 million fake Christmas trees sold worldwide are made in China from plastics and metals, and some with enough lead in them to warrant a warning label. Additionally, artificial trees are not biodegradable and usually end up in landfills a mere 6-9 years after they have been purchased, where they leach harmful chemicals into the environment.

In this age of going green and worries about our economy, what better way to show your com-



Cutting your own Christmas tree from a local tree farm is a tradition for many American families.

mitment than to chose a natural, renewable crop that is carbon neutral, supports local businesses, is biodegradable, and looks and smells good to boot?

Choosing a tree.

Whether pre-cut and purchased from a lot in town or cut fresh from a local Christmas tree farm, there are a few things to keep in mind when choosing this year's tree.

- Know what height and width you need before heading out.
- Check the trunk to be sure that it is sufficiently straight and will fit your tree stand.
- Do a freshness test. Green needles on fresh trees will break crisply when bent with the fingers while dry needles will come off in your hand. If there's a shower of green needles when you gently shake the tree, it's too dry.
- Look closely at the needles; trees with less than desirable color can be painted green to help them sell better.

Christmas tree characteristics.

There are many species of conifers to choose from when shopping for the perfect Christmas tree.



Scots pine is one of the most popular Christmas tree species in the U.S.

- **White pine** - soft, flexible bluish-green needles; good needle retention; little aroma; flexible branches not suitable for heavy ornaments.
- **Scots pine** - soft-flexible needles; bright green color; excellent needle retention; sturdy branches. Scots pine is the most common Christmas tree species sold in the U.S.
- **White spruce** - short, bluish-green, very sharp needles; mild scent; naturally conical shape; sturdy branches; excellent for all sorts of ornaments.
- **Colorado blue spruce** - sharp needles; green to silver-blue in color; not very fragrant; symmetrical form and good needle retention.
- **Fraser fir** - dark, blue-green needles; pleasant scent; branches turn slightly upwards at the tips; good form and needle-retention.
- **Concolor fir** - small, narrow needles; pleasing shape and aroma; good needle retention.
- **Balsam fir** - long-lasting, dark-green needles; pleasing fragrance.
- **Noble fir** - dark-green upturned needles; long-keeping tree; stiff branches for heavy ornaments.

- **Grand fir** - bright green needles; long-lasting; very fragrant; not the best for heavy ornaments
- **Douglas-fir** - soft, green to dark green needles; sweet fragrance. One of the most popular Christmas trees species.

Fresh Christmas tree care.

Trees on lots have probably been cut and transported in mid-November and because of this will not last as long as ones fresh cut at your local tree farm. When a Christmas tree is cut, over half of its weight is water, so it should come as no surprise that keeping your tree well-watered is of the utmost importance. We go out to a local tree farm every year and cut our real Christmas tree the last weekend of November. With diligent watering (especially the first few weeks) they always last into the New Year.

Displaying trees in water in a traditional reservoir-type stand is the most effective way of maintaining their freshness and minimizing needle loss problems. Choose a sturdy stand that is large enough to hold your tree and has a deep reservoir. A general rule of thumb is that your stand should be able to supply one quart of water per inch of your tree's stem diameter. The outer layers of wood on the trunk are the most efficient in taking up water and should not be removed, so avoid whittling down the sides to fit a stand.

When you are ready to bring in the tree, make a fresh cut perpendicular to the stem axis and remove about a 1/2-inch thick disk of wood from the base of the trunk before putting the tree in the stand.

Check the stand daily to make sure that the level of water does not go below the base of the tree - this is the most important thing you can do to ensure the longevity of your tree. With many stands, there can still be water in the stand even though the base of the tree is no longer submerged in water. Lowering the room tempera-

ture will slow the drying process, resulting in less water consumption each day.

And, as always, safety first!

- Keep displayed trees away from sources of heat (fireplaces, heaters, heat vents).
- Use lights that produce low heat, such as miniature lights, and always inspect light sets prior to placing them on the tree. If worn, replace with a new set.
- Do not overload electrical circuits.
- Always turn off the tree lights when leaving the house or when going to bed.
- Monitor the tree for freshness. After Christmas or if the tree is dry, remove it from the house.
- Never burn any part of a Christmas tree in a wood stove or fireplace.

For more information please go to the following links:

- The National Christmas Tree Association - www.christmastree.org/home.cfm
- Christmas Tree Farm Network - www.christmas-tree.com/real/

And when all the carols have been sung and the fudge and eggnog is gone, know that there are over 4,000 local Christmas tree recycling programs throughout the United States. Call your local waste management center for information about a program near you.

This article first appeared in the Farm Bureau Producer, December, 2011.

About the Author: Yvonne Barkley is an Associate Extension Forester at the University of Idaho, Moscow, ID.



There are approximately 15,000 farms growing Christmas trees in the U.S., which provide full- or part-time employment to over 100,000 people.