



# UI Extension Forestry Information Series II

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## O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree...

*Yvonne C. Barkley*

The holidays are here and, for 30-35 million American families the centerpiece of their holiday traditions is a real Christmas tree. Though the lively debate between folks that prefer live Christmas trees versus those that prefer the fake stuff continues, it is hard to ignore the facts. Real Christmas trees support hard-working local tree farmers, are organic, carbon neutral, biodegradable, can be recycled, and smell good to boot.

### *Not only green when summer's here...*

There are close to 350 million real Christmas trees currently growing on tree farms in the U.S., with approximately 25-30 million sold each year. Tree farmers spend hundreds of hours cultivating their trees, a job that keeps over 100,000 people employed throughout the country. On average, tree farmers plant three trees for every one cut each season; trees

that hold soil and provide clean air and water, while offering habitat for many bird and small mammals.

### *But also when it's cold and clear...*

There are a few things to consider before you shop for your real Christmas tree. First and foremost – what kind of tree do you want? People often ask what the best variety is, and the answer is the one that best suits your wants and needs. Do you need a tree that will support a lot of heavy ornaments? One native to our region? Or is the most important feature the heavenly smell your tree brings into your home for those few short weeks of the year?

Before you leave the house, there are a few more things to do.

- **Measure twice, cut once.** Know the height and width of the space your tree will occupy – trees look smaller when they are outside under the open sky.
- **Pricing.** Ask about the pricing. Some tree farms and retail lots measure and price their trees individually, while others sell them by the foot.
- **Going home.** Bring something to secure the tree to your vehicle. Twine is often available at lots but can be slippery. Bungee cords work well, as do straps with adjustable buckles.
- **Tree stands.** Make sure you have a tree stand that does not leak, is large enough to hold the tree stable, and has a reservoir big enough a sufficient amount of water. A tree can use up to one quart of water a day for each inch of stem diameter, so a tree with a four-inch trunk will need a a stand that holds at least one gallon of water.



Spring Valley Family Tree Farm, Troy, ID.

Photo courtesy of the Spring Valley Family Tree Farm

*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, such pleasure do you bring us...*

Now that you know what you want, where do you find it? Retail Christmas tree lots can be run by individuals who rent a space for the season or by local retail or big-box stores. Regardless of the retailer, ask questions before you buy. Where are the trees from? Are they cut and delivered once at the beginning of the season, or will there be several shipments over the course of the season?

Once you choose your tree, test it for freshness. Begin by running a branch through your enclosed hand. Needles should stay firmly attached and not come off easily. Next, bend an outer branch. Branches should be should be pliable, not brittle. A tree with brittle branches, excessive needle drop, a musky smell, and/or discolored foliage has deteriorated past usefulness. If in doubt, select another tree. If they all fail the freshness test, go to another retailer.

U-cut Christmas tree farms often provide warm drinks and cookies, music, a chance to make or buy a fresh wreath, purchase holiday gifts, and most importantly, a place to make wonderful memories with family and friends.

Before heading out to a U-cut tree farm make sure everyone dresses accordingly. Though fields will be well-groomed, there will be bumps and holes, tree stumps, and other natural hazards. Wear comfortable shoes and old clothes. Bring gloves and, if necessary,

rain gear. Saws are usually provided by the operator but bring your own if you have a favorite. Many tree farms prohibit pets due to safety reasons and to keep dogs from 'marking' trees. If allowed, be considerate and keep your four-legged family member on a leash.

Once there, have a chat with the tree farmer, who can point you towards they kind of tree you want. Get a saw if you didn't bring one. Many tree farms will give you a tarp to lay your tree on once it is cut, making it easier to drag it to the parking area and keeping it clean in muddy conditions. ATV's are also common on tree farms and may be available to take the elderly or disabled out to the field with the rest of their group.

There will be a lot of trees and everyone will have a favorite. Once you have narrowed the choices, look at each to see if the trunk is straight and it is the correct height and width. Cutting the tree is a two-person job. The sawyer usually lies on the ground with the saw while their assistant holds the tree. As the tree is being sawn, the assistant should gently pull the tree in the opposite direction of the cut so the saw doesn't bind.

Once cut, trees can be carried or dragged to the parking area. Many tree farms provide shaking or blowing services so that you will depart with a perfectly clean tree. Some trees farms will also have a machine that wraps your tree in netting, making it easier to transport.



Retail Christmas trees lots offer good selections and convenience.

Photo credit: [www.coolspringsnursery.com](http://www.coolspringsnursery.com)



U-cut tree farms not only offer the freshest real Christmas trees, but often offer food and drink, as well as activities for families to make memories from.

Photo Credit: All Things Christmas.com

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*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, thou tree most fair and lovely...*

If properly cared for, a freshly cut real Christmas tree can last four to six weeks. When a tree is cut, more than half its weight is water, so it makes sense that correctly watering your tree is the most important thing you can do to keep it looking beautiful.

Trees take up water in a thin layer of tissues directly under the bark called the cambium. When cut, air enters this layer and decreases the amount of water absorbed. By making a fresh cut before putting your tree in water, you reopen blocked tissues and allow your tree to absorb water better. A one-inch cut perpendicular to the base of the trunk is all you need. Once cut, immediately put your tree in water. If your tree is wet, or you're not ready to bring it inside, temporarily stored it in a cool location in a bucket of water.

Once inside, place your tree away from heat sources and check the stand daily to make sure that the level of water does not go below the base of the tree. It is normal for the rate of water absorption to fluctuate from day to day. Drilling a hole in the base of the trunk does NOT improve water uptake, nor does the water temperature. There is no need to add bleach, aspirin, fertilizer, or other things to the water to make your tree last longer; research has shown that plain tap water is best.

*Each shining light, each silver bell; no other sight spreads cheer so well...*

Once set in its stand, it's time to decorate your tree. Place your tree so that the best side is showing. Inspect all light sets prior to placing them on the tree and replace worn sets and burned out bulbs. Using lights that produce low heat will extend the life of your tree.

Start loosely wrapping strands of lights at the top and work your way down the tree. While some people like to wrap each branch with lights and others prefer to just circle the outside, there really is no wrong way to string lights. Lights and garland create a nice background for your ornaments. Garlands can be wired ribbon, beads, strands of popcorn and cranberries, paper chains, or whatever your creativity creates. ornaments can match or not, be new or old, store bought or hand-made – once again the choice



Every real Christmas tree has a singular beauty of its own.

Photo credit: Creative Commons, no attribute required.

is yours. Hang heavier ornaments lower on the tree and in the interior where the branches are thicker and offer more support. Finally, add your tree topper and tree skirt. Arrange the skirt so you can easily access the tree stand daily to add water.

To be safe, never overload electrical circuits and always turn off the tree lights when leaving the house or when going to bed.

*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, how steadfast are your branches...*

Once the holidays are over, there are many ways to responsibly dispose of your real Christmas tree.

- Check your local newspaper to see if curbside recycling is available where you live. Many places will collect trees during regular pickup schedules following Christmas. If not available, take your tree to a drop-off recycling location. Some nonprofit organizations pickup trees; Boy Scout troops, for example, often offer a pickup service for a small donation.
- You can put your Christmas tree in the garden or backyard and shelter birds; by adding fresh orange slices, strung popcorn, and/or bird seed ornaments you can feed them as well.
- Real Christmas trees are biodegradable and can be chipped and used as mulch in your landscape.

*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, much pleasure can you give me...*

Wishing you all Happy Holidays and a healthy and Happy New Year.