

Selecting and Preserving Christmas Trees

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Every year, families try hard to select a “good” tree and keep it green and beautiful throughout the holidays. Here are some tips to finding a healthy, fresh tree and keeping it nourished through the next 4-6 weeks.

Historically, families would make a day out of selecting and cutting the family tree from a nearby grower or forest. There are still a few choose-and-cut growers in central Florida, but many of us visit a tree lot or mass-merchandise to pick the perfect already-cut tree.

Picking a Good One

Here are a few tips to assuring that you begin with a quality tree.

No dry, brittle tree is going to safely survive the holiday season. Start the holiday season with a tree that retains a large percentage of its needles. With no way to know just how long a tree has been cut or how it has been handled since then, there are two simple ways to “test” for freshness. A bright green color is not a very good indication any more of a tree being fresh, as most cut trees are now coated with green paint. Two other methods can be more effective indicators of longevity. Stroke a branch through your hand. Only a very few flexible needles should come off. Another reliable test is to hold a tree up a few inches off the ground and tamp it firmly on the ground. Fresh trees will lose only a few, inner needles. If a large number of needles fall to the ground after testing several trees, move on to another lot.

Home Care

Once you get the tree home, there are a couple simple things you can do to extend the tree’s freshness. Place the tree in an unheated area, such as a porch or garage, to protect it from the elements until you are ready to decorate. Or do as my family does and set up the tree on the back porch, where it is easily viewed from inside but out in the cooler temperatures where it will likely stay fresh longer.

Living Christmas Trees

The freshest Christmas tree, but possibly the most difficult, is one growing in a pot from a nursery. Many families choose a fresh tree and plant it into

their landscape in January. Homes are notorious for low humidity at this time of year, so extra care must be given to assure that these plants receive ample water. Increase survival chances by keeping a live tree for no more than about 10 days.

U-Cut Christmas Tree Farms

In central Florida there are a few u-cut farms that will give you the opportunity to enjoy Mother Nature while selecting a really fresh tree. Since your tree is as fresh as can be, the only concern will be selecting a tree with the perfect height and shape for your home. Be certain to keep plenty of water in the reservoir for this tree, too.

Keeping the Tree Fresher, Longer

Once your Christmas tree is home, make a fresh, clean cut across the bottom of the trunk to open up the water conducting tubes; then, set the tree in the stand. If you aren’t ready to place it in the stand, a pail of water will do for a few days. During this time, the tree will also relax its branches for maximum display space. Trees can absorb up to a gallon of water each day, so be sure your stand’s reservoir can hold enough water so you don’t have to refill more often than you’ll remember. As long as the tree is able to absorb and transpire water, it will stay reasonably fresh and fire-resistant. Once the reservoir dries, a seal of pitch begins to form on the cut and the tree is no longer able to absorb water. To remedy this, it may be necessary to re-cut the stump a couple of inches, or the tree will dry out and could become a fire hazard.

After Christmas, recycle your tree, rather than adding to the landfill. There are at least two options to extend the “life” of the tree. Take it to one of Pasco County’s recycling centers where they will chip trees for mulch. Another option to consider is keeping the tree or its boughs through the winter outdoors. (A link to the recycling locations within Pasco County can be found at: http://pasco.ifas.ufl.edu/PDF-Holiday_Tree_Recycling.pdf.) You can also use the whole tree as a cover for birds and other wildlife, or cut boughs can be used to cover frost-sensitive plants on especially cold nights.