HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

SELECTING A CHRISTMAS TREE

Fresh Christmas cut trees are a part of many family celebrations during this holiday season. Selecting the perfect tree and decorating it year after year create family memories that last a lifetime. According to the Florida Department of Agriculture, nearly 30 million fresh-cut trees will be used nationally this year for the festive season.

Grown on farms across the United States and Canada, Christmas tree harvesting does not upset the ecology. It is the rule of thumb of tree farmers to plant two to three trees for every one cut. That means for the 30 million trees harvested this holiday season, more than 85 million trees will be planted this coming spring.

When going to select a tree, remember that freshness is the most important factor. For a really fresh tree, you can choose to cut your own at one of the local Christmas tree farms. Members of the Florida Christmas Tree Association have been busy trimming and thinning plantation grown trees to develop a uniform, compact shape. Florida grown Christmas trees include sand pine, Virginia pine, red cedar and leyland cypress. While wild sand pines tend to be thin "Charlie Brown" trees, trees from farms are pruned and trained into the dense conical shape we think of for holiday decorating. For a list of Florida Christmas tree growers, visit their website.

If you decide on a traditional tree cut from a Northern tree farm, you still may be able to find a fresh tree. The earlier you purchase your fresh-cut tree, the better. Rescue the tree from the hot, drastic conditions on the tree lot. Most cut trees are brought from colder areas up north. Once delivered, warm weather and sunshine cause the trees to dry and lose their needles. The fresher the tree, the longer it will hold its needles.

The needles should be resilient. Take hold of a branch about six inches from the tip, between your thumb and forefinger, then pull your hand towards the tip, allowing the branch to slide through your fingers. The needles should remain on the branch and be flexible, not brittle. Also, try bouncing the cut end on the ground and see how many needles fall. It is normal for trees to loose a few needles, but the fewer the better. Sap on the cut end of a fresh tree stump will be sticky, not hard or caked. Some trees naturally hold their needles better than others. Douglas firs and Scotch pines are northern conifers, which hold up well. Spruces tend to loose their needles more rapidly.

The tree should also have a good fragrance and green color. A fresh tree will retain its moisture content and thereby keep its fragrance and needles, if kept in a stand that has a good water-holding capacity. Moist trees will not be a fire hazard. A tree that is purchased moist, fresh cut and provided with adequate water will take water into the stems and continue to stay moist.

When you get a cut tree home, recut the stump at an angle and put it in a bucket of fresh water. The angle cut exposes more stem than a straight cut; the fresh cut end will allow water uptake to keep the needles fresh. Keep the tree in a cool, shady spot until time to decorate. Replenish water in the bucket often since the trees can drink up to a quart of water a day!

When you get ready to bring the tree indoors, cut the stem off again so it will fit flush in a tree stand. Make the new cut at least a half-inch above the original cut. Use a sturdy tree stand with a basin, which holds about one gallon of water. Remember to refill the basin daily and anchor the tree so pets and children can’t topple it.

With these few tips, you will be able to select a truly fresh-cut tree that will last throughout the season. After the season remember to recycle your tree with the landscape debris. For Saint Cloud residents, you can swap your fresh-cut tree for a free landscape tree. Call Jessica Sullivan at (321) 697-3000 for more information on this upcoming event. Have a safe and Happy Holiday.

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