Whatever you celebrate, remember the reason for the season. The season is busy and hectic, but what makes it special for me is time with family and friends.

I recently took a family trip for a new tradition. We cut down a farm raised sand pine for our Christmas tree. These trees are native to deep sandy soils in Central Florida. In the wild, they are surely the tree Charlie Brown made famous with their scrawny branches and short needles. Tree farmers fertilize, prune and shape them into dense cone shaped trees ready for lights, tinsel and ornaments.

The tree farm had special charm with a petting zoo, a campfire for do it yourself hotdogs and s'mores. A ride on a hay wagon took us on a tour of the farm to pick the special tree then returned to bring our chosen one back to the car. The wonderful smell of pine and oak smoke from the fire made for great memories. Didn't need hot chocolate; the thrill of selecting and cutting our own tree made for a nice warm feeling inside.

I have not had the tradition of cold snowy days or sleigh rides. The song Jingle Bells was just words to me as I have never seen a one horse open sleigh. The Christmas cards with snow scenes are pretty, but not what I grew up with. It was only a decade ago that I visited family up north and had a chance to make my first snow angel and build a snow person.

To some, the 75° air under blue skies are far from traditional Christmas memories, but to a native Floridian, warm weather is just part of the season. As children, we played with our new badminton set in the back yard in shorts and t-shirts. We ate Santa shaped ice cream cones outside to keep the drips out of my aunt's house. We played football and kickball instead of sledding or having snowball fights.

Our red berried wreaths was made from "Florida Holly' cut from the yard. It wasn't until years later that I discovered this family favorite was Brazilian pepper, an invasive shrub that should not be encouraged.

If you are longing for hollies for holiday decorations, instead, select Chinese or American hollies for bright red holiday berries. You may not be able to grow a Frazier fur or blue spruce, but Leyland cypress, southern red cedar and sand pine are other options for home grown Florida Christmas trees.

Even if you have chosen an artificial tree, you can still enjoy the fragrance of fresh greens with boughs sold at florist shops or nurseries or trimmings from a Christmas tree lot. Clippings bundled with a bow or in a vase make a nice indoor decoration and bring seasonal smells home.

What do you do with your fresh cut tree after the holidays? Why not start a new tradition and turn your holiday trash into a living treasure? Participate in St. Cloud's tree swap, open to anyone in the county. Take your dead Christmas tree to be shredded for merry mulch at the St. Cloud landfill and pick up a living tree for your landscape. Call the St. Cloud Parks Department Wednesday at 407-957-7243 for the date and time for the Swap event.

All of us have special memories of holidays gone by. I hope you make wonderful memories this year, whether celebrating old traditions or making new ones. Best wishes for a wonderful holiday season!

Think ahead to the new year. UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension has many free classes scheduled to help you learn more about trees for Central Florida landscapes and tree care. Osceola County residents will get a voucher for attending the class that can be used at select local nurseries for a free tree. Get a new tree for a new year. Call Cindy at 321-697-3015 to register.

Mark your calendar now for the 2007 Osceola County Fair. Your special plant may be eligible for a blue ribbon
this year. Enter your favorites to be judged in the Community Horticulture Division. Though the Fair is not until Feb. 9-18, 2007, registration for judging is only open Saturday, January 6th between 8am-2pm. Bring in your plants for registration to be entered in one of the following classes: produce (vegetables and fruits); bonsai; hanging baskets; creative container gardens (dish gardens, terrariums, pots, etc.); potted flowering plants; and house plants. For more information, call Jennifer or Eva at 321-697-3000.

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