

Ask an Expert - Tips for Christmas Tree Selection and Care

By: Michael Kuhns, Utah State University
Extension forestry specialist, 435-797-4056,



mike.kuhns@usu.edu

In late November and early December, many Utahns head to their local Christmas tree grower or tree lot to make this year's selection. Proper selection and care for a live tree once it is home can provide for a happier and safer holiday season.

The first thing to consider is tree size. Measure the space where the tree will be, including width and ceiling height. Remember that several inches will be cut from the butt end, but the stand may add several inches to the overall height.

Several types of live trees are available, including trees separated from their root systems when they are cut, potted or balled-and-burlapped trees that retain their roots so they can be planted after a week or two indoors, and artificial trees.

Natural or Live vs. Artificial Trees – Artificial “trees” are popular, but they are not part of the tradition of bringing greenery from outside into the home at the darkest and coldest time of the year as a way to make winter more tolerable. Some people buy an artificial tree thinking it is more environmentally friendly than cutting a tree every year. However, you do not need to feel guilty about cutting a live Christmas tree. Most trees bought from lots in Utah are grown on farms in Oregon and Washington and they will be cut no matter what. Even natural trees cut from nearby forests are nearly always removed from federal and state lands by the person you are buying the tree from. They purchase a permit that tells them where, how many and what species of tree can be cut, and their

removal is part of a silvicultural plan or prescription. And once the holidays are over, your tree can still be useful as firewood or mulch.

Cut Trees – Cut, live trees are the most common type of Christmas tree. Three types are generally available – a pre-cut tree purchased from a dealer, a choose-and-cut tree purchased from a local grower and a wild-grown native tree.

Freshness and moistness are the keys to having a Christmas tree that will last through the season. Once the needles dry out, they will usually stay dry, even when the tree is placed in a stand with water. The best way to ensure that your tree is fresh is to buy from a local grower or retailer you know and trust.

Trees shipped into tree lots from out of state may be dried out because they had to be cut prior to shipping as early as September. Follow these steps to be sure the tree you buy is fresh and high quality:

1. Gently pull on the needles. They should be tightly attached to the twig.
2. Shake the tree vigorously or bounce the butt on the ground. If many green needles fall, look further. Dead, brown needles may have accumulated inside the canopy over the years, and though you may want to shake them out or otherwise remove them before you take the tree indoors, those needles falling do not indicate a problem.
3. Check that the tree has a fresh, green color. Some trees are sprayed with a blue-green dye. This dye is harmless but be sure it's not hiding dead, dry needles.
4. Buy early before all of the desirable trees have been sold. Firs and pines generally hold needles better than spruces.
5. Break a few needles. They should be flexible and will feel moist or possibly sticky. They should also be fragrant when crushed.
6. Be sure limbs are strong enough to support lights and ornaments. Limbs should also be well placed to give the tree a pleasing shape. Minor defects can often be turned toward a wall.
7. Ask the dealer if the tree was locally grown. Local trees are more likely to be fresh since they don't have to be shipped long distances and can be cut closer to Christmas.

Choose-and-cut trees are available from Christmas tree growers throughout Utah. Buy them the same way you would a pre-cut tree. Freshness and health are still the most important characteristics. Some growers will cut the tree for you, and others will let you select and cut your own.

Once a fresh tree is brought home, store it in an unheated garage or in a protected area outdoors with the butt end in water until you are ready to bring it indoors. Keep it in the shade and out of the wind so it doesn't dry out. When you first bring it home or when you bring it inside, recut a thin section from the butt end if possible to open the tree's vessels. When you are ready to bring the tree in, cut the butt end again if it has been stored very long. You can attach a ribbon to this cut disc to make an ornament of it. The disc will have 7 to 10 growth rings, which can be used to denote important family events.

Potted or Balled-and-Burlapped Trees – Some people buy a potted or balled-and-burlapped Christmas tree from a nursery with roots intact in the hope of having a new landscape tree in the spring. Whether it is worth it to do this depends on the cost of the tree (it will usually be more expensive than a cut tree, plus you may need to pay for delivery since it will not be easy to tie it to the car roof) and whether there might be sentimental value to your family to know that certain trees in your landscape were part of past holiday celebrations.

If you are going to plant a tree with its roots still attached, then plant it after the holidays, there are a few things you need to do to increase your chances of success.

1. Buy a healthy tree from a reputable nursery or grower. Expect to pay a higher price than for a cut Christmas tree.
2. Keep the soil in the ball or pot moist until well after it is transplanted after Christmas. A frozen ball need not be watered if the crown is shaded and protected.
3. Lift and carry the tree by the ball or pot, not the top.
4. Keep the tree in the house no longer than about 1 week.
5. Have the planting hole dug before the soil freezes, and keep the fill dirt thawed if possible. The hole should be about the depth of the root ball or slightly shallow and three times the width of the ball. Remove packing and binding materials when planting the tree. Stake the tree for its first year.

Fresh Tree Care – Once in your home, the tree should be placed in a sturdy stand that holds at least one gallon

of water. A fresh tree can lose this much water or more a day, so avoid small stands. Place the tree away from heat sources like space heaters and fireplaces, and close furnace vents near it.

Lights on the tree should be UL approved and protected by an in-line fuse. Small, pin-point lights are good because they remain cool. Old lights with cracked insulation or loose sockets should be discarded. Turn lights off when the tree is unattended. Flammable decorations should not be used on a Christmas tree with electric lights. Candles should never be used to light a Christmas tree or wreath.

A fresh tree that is watered daily can stay moist and safe for several weeks. If a tree is displayed in a public building, it generally should be kept up for no more than 15 days and should be treated with a fire-retardant solution.

After Christmas – Christmas trees can be useful, even after they are taken down. They can be placed in the yard to add greenery and act as a bird haven until spring. Trees can also be used for firewood or chopped up and used for mulch. Most communities have programs to gather trees after Christmas to be chipped for mulch or other uses.