

Now that Thanksgiving has come and gone, thoughts shift to preparing for the next big holiday celebration. The passing of Thanksgiving not only marks the start of the holiday shopping season, it is also a time many families dedicate to setting up the family Christmas tree.

We commonly associate the placement of evergreens in the home, with the celebration of the birth of Christ. In fact, evergreen trees have been used to commemorate the winter season since even before the birth of Christ, and in many areas of the world, non-Christians still use evergreens to observe the season. The first written documentation of a tree being decorated is from Germany in 1531.

In America, Christmas trees have been a part of the holiday tradition since the mid-1800's. In 1851 the first retail Christmas tree lot in America was opened in New York City. By 1856 the use of Christmas trees in the home had become so popular that President Franklin Pierce placed one in the White House.

In the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century small candles were used to light Christmas trees. In 1882 Thomas Edison's assistant Edward Johnson invented electric Christmas lights, and by 1890 they were in mass production.

Only briefly during Teddy Roosevelt's presidency were Christmas trees absent from within the White House. He banned them during his time as President, citing environmental reasons.

President Calvin Coolidge held the first national Christmas tree lighting ceremony on the White House lawn in 1923. The national Christmas tree has been lighted in early December every year since, save a few exceptions. In 1963, the tree was not lighted until December 22, in observance of a 30-day mourning period following the assassination of President Kennedy. In 1979, only the top ornament was lighted as a way to honor the American hostages being held in Iran.

Every year since 1966, the National Christmas Tree Association has donated a tree the President and his family for use as the official "White House Christmas Tree." Every year, this tree is displayed in the Blue Room of the White House. This year's tree is a Fraser Fir from Wisconsin. It was dedicated on December 1, 2003.

Most Christmas trees used at the White House, and in the homes of most Americans come from California, Michigan, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania or Wisconsin. These states are the top Christmas tree producers, with over 100,000 labors caring for more than one million acres in order to produce 34 to 36 million trees annually. Six to ten years of care and maintenance are required to produce a mature six to seven foot tree.

Many people are apprehensive about using real Christmas trees. Some fear the risk of fire, and others, like Teddy Roosevelt are concerned about the environmental impact of harvesting Christmas trees.

With respect to risk of fire, less than one-half of one percent of all residential fires is started from a real Christmas tree.

Environmentally, consider that two to three seedlings are planted for every tree harvested. Additionally, an acre of Christmas trees provides the oxygen requirements of 18 people, while at the same time removing dust and pollen from the air. Growing trees also provide a habitat for wildlife. Over 59% of harvest trees are recycled in some manner. Old Christmas trees may be chipped and used as mulch, sunk in a pond to serve as fish shelter or used as soil erosion barriers.

An alternative to a real Christmas tree is of course an artificial one. There certainly are benefits to artificial trees. They do not require water and do not drop their needles. However, artificial Christmas trees are not without concerns. On average an artificial tree is kept for just six to eight years. Families change tree size, style or shape and dispose of their old artificial trees. Old trees then end up in landfills, where they last a lifetime.

The use of artificial trees is growing in popularity so much so that only 21 percent of Americans have a real tree while 48 percent have an artificial one.

If you are a purist and traditionalist and still cannot see yourself living with an artificial tree, then spend a little extra effort this holiday season to choose a real Christmas tree that will not disappoint you nor make you regret passing by the artificial trees.

White pines, Fraser firs, Douglas firs, and Scotch pines are the most common Christmas trees available in this area. A white pine is a beautiful tree with soft, flexible needles that will not hurt you as you put up the tree or decorate. These trees are not particularly aromatic and while they do have good needle retention, their soft nature makes it difficult for them to support the weight of ornaments.

Fraser firs are not grown in great quantity in this area, although they are plentiful in North Carolina, and are therefore readily available as an already cut tree. These trees have a great form with branches that turn slightly upward. They smell wonderful and have great needle retention.

If you prefer a sweet fragrance, try a Douglas fir. These trees have needles that are somewhat softer and longer than a Fraser, yet are rigid enough to support ornaments. These too have excellent needle retention.

Scotch pines are very common to Central Virginia. These have long stiff needles and are a beautiful bright green color. This is perhaps the easiest Christmas tree to replant, with the highest survival rate. If you are considering a root-balled tree, the Scotch pine is an excellent choice.

Once you have settled on the variety of tree you would like. Make sure you pick the freshest tree possible. Grasp a branch and pull it lightly toward you. It is a good sign if few needles fall off in your hand. Next, softly bounce the tree on its stump. Few green needles should fall. If brown needles fall from the interior there is no need for concern.

After you take your new, fresh Christmas tree home, cut off ½ to 1" from the bottom of the trunk and place it immediately into a bucket of water. If you are unable to set up the tree right away, store it in a cool location out of the sun and wind. When setting up the tree, be sure to use a stand that is large enough to hold one quart of water for every inch diameter of trunk.

Make the most of your water by choosing a good location for your new tree. It should be away from all heat sources to reduce moisture loss. Also, do not add anything to the tree's water. There are many commercial additives available, but they actually tend to be more detrimental to the tree than helpful. Plain tap water is best, and you will probably not have to use quite as much of it if you keep it clean and free of additives. Expect to add one quart of water per day for the first week the tree is in the house. Avoid using anti-transpirant sprays on the tree, as this will limit its water uptake and needles will be lost sooner.

Choosing and decorating a Christmas tree is a great winter tradition. If you do not wish to be bothered with a real Christmas tree, enjoy knowing you will never again have to be scratched while trying to fill the tree stand with water. If you prefer an old-fashioned real tree, rest assured that less than five gallons of water will likely keep it through the season.