

THE OUTSIDER

Illinois Extension Horticulture serving Henry, Mercer, Rock Island, and Stark



NATURAL CHRISTMAS TREES

According to the National Christmas Tree Association, approximately 25-30 million real Christmas trees are sold in the United States each holiday season. Unlike artificial trees, which are made of petroleum or plastic, cut trees are a renewable resource, grown specifically for harvesting and replanting.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CHRISTMAS TREE

Some of the most popular species used as cut Christmas trees include Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*), White fir (*Abies concolor*), Fraser Fir (*Abies fraseri*), Scotch or Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), White pine (*Pinus strobus*) and White spruce (*Picea glauca*). Some differentiating characteristics include fragrance, length of needles, stiffness of branches, branch density, and color. Sometimes tradition influences species choice.

Some conifer species dry out faster than others and may influence consumer choice based on how long the tree is expected to decorate the home. Spruce (*Picea* sp.) tend to drop needles more quickly than other species. Firs (*Abies* sp.) tend to retain leaves a little longer and pine species (*Pinus* sp.) are the longest-lasting. No matter the species, freshness matters. Cutting a tree from the field will yield the freshest Christmas tree. Shopping for a pre-cut tree at a local lot may provide an opportunity to ask about harvest dates and limit the time between the field and the foyer. Trees available at large retail stores are harvested months in advance and are shipped in from distant locations, special attention needs to be paid to freshness when choosing one of these trees.



TREE CARE AT HOME

As you transport your tree home, you must protect the needles from desiccating winds and damage. Wraps are often available at retail outlets or a firmly secured tarp around the tree will help. Once home, a fresh, horizontal cut should be made to encourage water consumption and stability in the stand. Tree stands should be appropriately sized to support the tree and hold an adequate supply of water. Trees should be placed in water as soon as possible.

If possible, locate the tree away from major sources of heat such as fireplaces, heating vents, and radiators. Lowering the temperature of the room will also help reduce transpiration rates and will lower water needs. Keeping trees out of direct sunlight helps reduce photosynthetic processes, also helping to conserve water use. Check stand water levels often and do not let levels go below the base of the tree.

A beautifully decorated Christmas tree should be enjoyed all season long but for safety, lights should be turned off when away or sleeping.



Turn lights off when people are away and keep away from sources of heat.





WHAT TO DO WHEN THE SEASON IS OVER?

Once the excitement and celebration of the holidays have passed, it is time to pack away all the glittering lights and ornaments...and recycle the Christmas tree. Just like other living plants in our lives, once their time has come, they can be recycled into useful products like mulch and compost. Many compost facilities accept undecorated trees after the holiday and some municipalities have a pick-up day. Contact your local compost facility or city for specific information.

Disposing of a spent Christmas can be done by an individual. The tree can be broken down and branches can be used as mulch in the landscape. The tree trunk can be sliced into tree cookies and used for crafts or used in an outdoor fire pit. Trees can be propped up outdoors and redecorated with natural materials to feed the birds. If you or a friend have a fishpond, the entire undecorated tree can be sunk to create aquatic habitat.



OUTSIDER ACTION

Try these activities to be more of an Outsider:

- Learn more from the National Christmas Tree Association at <https://realchristmastrees.org>
- Attend a local Christmas tree lighting, or visit the Quad City Botanical Center to see their seasonal [Winter Nights Winter Lights Display](#). The gardens will be in winter bloom with over 160,000 glowing lights.

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