

Christmas Tree Care

A little forethought and a lot of water help to ensure a healthy and safe tree.

Artificial Christmas trees have their place, but little compares to the evergreen smell of a live Christmas tree! A simple stroll through the rows of bundled trees outside grocery stores can produce a flood of childhood memories from the gently wafting smell of fir, pine and spruce. The air is so crisp and fresh with the scent of evergreens that the urge to set up your tree immediately is almost overpowering.

So when *should* the tree go up? This is a question for which is there no hard and fast answer. Some folks charge out the door the day after Thanksgiving; they're lucky if they can wait until Dec. 1. Some wait until Dec. 24. Whatever your family tradition is, go with it and enjoy the season.

How do you pick a good tree? Now, that's a question we can answer a bit more objectively.

Before you pile the family into the car to go tree shopping (or hunting!), figure out where you will put the tree after you get it home. Pick a spot as far away from heat registers or baseboard heaters as possible. Check the ceiling height in your chosen spot and measure it, if necessary. Pay attention, also, to the floor space you have: Will a tree whose branches spread 6 feet at its base fit comfortably there? Perhaps a tree with a 5-ft. spread or less would be more appropriate. You decide. It is a good idea to put down an old plastic tablecloth or shower curtain to protect your floor from accidental over-watering. This can also help when taking the tree down, because it can catch most of the falling needles, instead of letting them get snagged in your carpet.

If you're cutting a tree fresh, you need only find a tree that looks good. But if you're buying a pre-cut tree from a tree farm or parking lot vendor, you'll want to find one that hasn't already begun to dry out. A fresh tree should be nice and green, with very few needles falling off. You can find a good tree by first checking the needles with a gentle tug on a single branch. Do a lot of needles come off in your hand? If so, look around a bit more. Pick up another tree and gently tamp it on the ground. If you see a lot of needles fall, or if you see a lot of brown needles, pick another tree.

When you arrive home with your tree, cut off an inch or two from the bottom of the trunk, then set the tree in its stand and water it immediately. This will help ensure good water uptake in the tree. It is also a good idea to keep your house a bit cooler than normal, so the tree will last longer and stay looking fresh. Check your tree's water level daily; don't let it go dry. If you have pets, do not add anything to the water that might harm them if they drink it.

When stringing your tree lights, check the cords for cracks and make sure they are all in good working order. Turn off the lights every night. Even though the Myth Busters duo had a tough time getting a bone-dry Christmas tree to catch fire when loaded down with a

ridiculous number of lights, Murphy's Law says none of us will be so lucky. Besides, you'll cut down a bit on your electric bill and it is, indeed, a safe habit to follow.

When Christmas is over and you are ready to throw out the tree, remember that it is still good for more than a landfill ornament. Set it up in the backyard and decorate it with popcorn or peanut butter for the birds, or chop/shred it and use it as mulch around your plants. In this way, it can become a gift that keeps on giving!



Photo by Jason Miller



Place your tree out of traffic lanes by tucking it into a corner or bay window. Check its water level daily to help prevent it from drying out and becoming a potential fire hazard. Photo by Jason Miller