

Caring for Your Holiday Plants

By Valerie Rose

December 14, 2012



Are you decorating your house for Christmas? An evergreen tree or boughs of cedar and fir will grace your living room with gifts for all the senses. The fragrance of conifers puts artificial scents to shame--and don't get me started on plug in air polluters--I mean, plug-in air "fresheners." Long before the development of synthetic wannabes, while dinosaurs evolved, conifers grew on ancient lands. Modern conifer species feature an array of foliage from sharp pine needles to the scale-like leaves of cedars and cypress to the flat needle-leaves of the Douglas fir.

The famous Scottish explorer and botanist David Douglas is immortalized in this tree's common name. In 1824 The Royal Horticultural Society in London sent Douglas to the Pacific Northwest to gather seeds and plants from the "New World." Returning from his travels, Douglas planted seedlings of his namesake trees at the Scone Palace in Scotland (which was not a bakery--the red sandstone building was first an abbey, then a castle).

Setting aside thoughts of warm, fragrant scones, let's return to the scent of evergreens. Whether you live in a castle, a bakery, or a house, a living tree lets you enjoy evergreen color and fragrance long after the holidays. Live in an apartment? Some dwarf evergreens will happily live in a container for years, especially if it is moved to a porch or balcony in the warmer months.

It is essential to choose the right species of evergreen for your home or yard. Bert Cregg, Extension Specialist at Michigan State University, said it is essential to choose a species that is hardy where you live. "There are several types of container-grown conifers such as Italian stone pine (*Pinus pinea*) sold in big box stores and supermarkets that are hardy in only the warmest parts of the country," Cregg said. "Limit indoor display of living trees to 10 days to two weeks. Most conifers will begin to lose dormancy shortly after being brought inside." Some species will begin to bud if the weather has been cold, and they've had sufficient chilling. This is fine if you are deliberately forcing a plant to grow and bloom out of its usual season, but the same process puts your evergreen at risk of damage from cold if it is planted outside when it is budding and ready for spring. "After the holidays, place the living tree in a protected but unheated space such as a garage or enclosed porch or patio," Cregg added. "The key here is that the tree needs some exposure to light - but avoid direct sun."

Once you get your tree home, do not just let it sit around. Chal Landgren, a conifer expert at Oregon State University Extension, advised, "Place the tree in water if you do not plan to put it up immediately. If more than 24 hours has elapsed since the trunk was last cut, making a fresh cut helps water uptake." You don't need to cut more than a 1/4-inch slice off the bottom of the trunk--unless you bought a massive tree for a room with a low ceiling. If that is the case, then you can cut some firewood while trimming the trunk to fit your room.

Do not give the tree any liquid "holiday cheer." "The list of things people have added to water is long and includes vodka, 7-Up, bleach, aspirin, sugar and more," Landgren said. "However, clean cold water is all that is needed. Some additives actually can cause your tree to shed needles or dry out more rapidly." Save the aspirin for your headaches and the soda for your guests.



Julie and Anthony Matier of Mount Vernon continue a family tradition of finding and cutting the perfect tree. Their daughter, Grace, helps with the selection at the Big Lake Tree Farm. *Photo by Christine Farrow/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

"Most tree stands are too small," Landgren advised. "A stand should hold a quart of water for every inch of stem diameter. Very few have the water holding capacity for today's large trees, and the stem will displace a large percentage of the water capacity of a small reservoir. Consider purchasing a new stand (or a smaller tree) if the water capacity is not adequate."

Keep the stand filled with water. But what happens if you forget? "If you refill the water stand within 24 hours after it went dry, most trees (Douglas fir, noble, Fraser) should rehydrate just fine," Landgren notes. "For grand fir, twelve hours may be the limit. So check the water level daily, especially in the first few days. Your tree may not be the only one drinking—your pets may be helping themselves to the water, too."

But even fresh evergreens may not be "green" in the environmental sense. "Many commercial Christmas tree farms spray their trees with up to 40 different pesticides!" according to Kathryn P. Maloney, Area Director for Northeastern State and Private Forestry for the USDA. She said, "Avoid exposing your children, pets and families to these toxins by choosing a healthier

alternative. Consider decorating a houseplant or buying a living tree (that can later be planted in your yard) instead of a traditional Christmas tree.” Another alternative is buying a potted rosemary plant from a nursery. You can hang lights and ornaments from the fragrant branches.

Whichever holiday plants you choose, be sure to get the right variety for your home or yard, and give them adequate water. Treat them well, and you can enjoy their beauty throughout the holiday season.



Left: Trees that are lined up at supermarkets and tree lots have often been cut a week or more before you bring them home. Remove at least ¼” from the base before placing the tree in a stand filled with water. **Middle:** Amaryllis is a stunning holiday plant with three to four large blossoms per stalk. The stalk sometimes reaches two feet tall and may require staking to support the flower head. **Right:** The true flowers of the poinsettia, a showy, nonpoisonous tropical plant from Central America, are the tiny yellow ones in the center. *Photo by Christine Farrow/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Caring for Other Holiday Plants:

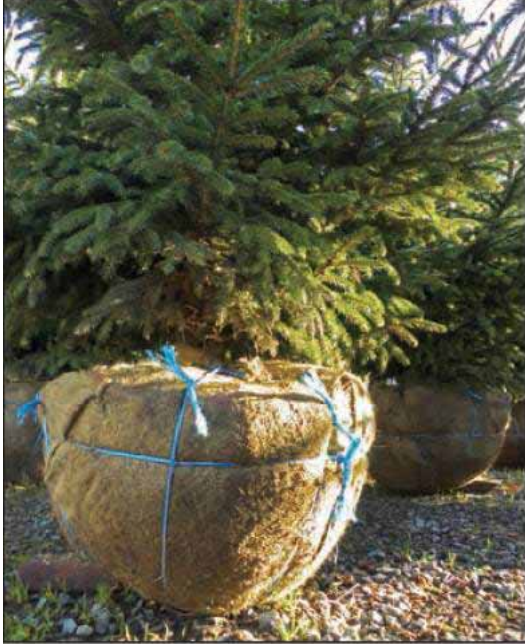
Poinsettia

- Give poinsettias 6 hours of bright light during the holidays.
- Keep away from cold drafts. Ideal temperatures are 60–70°F.
- Water only when soil is dry. Be sure to punch a hole in the decorative foil for drainage.
- Do not allow plant to wilt. A wilted plant may drop all its leaves.
- Water the plant to wet the soil. Wait 5-10 minutes and water again.

Amaryllis

- Remove blossoms after they have withered.
- Cut flower stalks back to 3-4 inches after flowering.
- Place pot in a sunny window and fertilize once per month.
- In September, stop watering, place pot in a cool, dark place (i.e., a basement). Remove foliage after it dies.
- In late October, start watering the plant. Place in a sunny window.
- Amaryllis should produce blooms in 6 - 8 weeks.

- Above information courtesy of the University of Illinois Extension Service



To enjoy and then plant a living tree, such as this one at Wells Nursery, be sure to remove the strong and burlap before placing the tree in the ground. *Photo by Christine Farrow/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

RESOURCES:

- ‘How Green is your Christmas Tree?’ Judy Scott, Oregon State University Extension Service, http://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/story.php?S_No=1163&storyType=garden
- “How Can I Keep A Christmas Tree Fresh?” George Pinyuh, Area Extension Agent, Retired, WSU, <http://gardening.wsu.edu/text/faqtopic.htm>