

Caring for Your Holiday Plants

By Valerie Rose
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Bring the outdoors inside – safely

Ah, the Christmas tree. It serves so many roles: a backdrop for ornaments and lights; a staging area for presents; a new scratching post for the cat; and a genuine air freshener with the invigorating tang of conifer forests putting plug-in synthetic scents to shame.

It all started with a tradition older than Christianity. In some ancient cultures, people believed that having evergreens indoors protected against ghosts, evil spirits and illness. German Christians in the 16th century brought decorated evergreen trees into their homes. In the 21st century (my, how time flies), it's helpful to know how to enjoy our holiday greenery safely.

When picking a cut tree, Chal Landgren, Oregon State University Extension Christmas tree specialist, says you should use the same standards you use for buying vegetables. "Pick out a tree that looks fresh and healthy, with needles that snap like a fresh carrot," Landgren advises. "Shake it a few times to get rid of old needles."

Avoid trees that are losing more than a few needles. This is the sign of a dried-out tree and the sign of a fire hazard. Once you get your tree home, don't just let it sit around. "Place the tree in water if you do not plan to put it up immediately," says Landgren. "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 ¼-inch slice off the bottom of the trunk—unless you bought a massive tree for a room with a low ceiling. Then you'll need to create a Christmas tree and some firewood.

While you may want to serve a variety of beverages to holiday guests, don't spike the tree's water. "The list of things people have added to water is long and includes vodka, 7-Up, bleach, aspirin, sugar and more," Landgren recalls. "Clean cold water is all that is needed. Some additives actually can cause your tree to shed needles or dry out more rapidly." So save the aspirin for your headaches, and the soda for your guests.

Most tree stands are too small according to Landgren. "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."

If your stand holds enough water, it's up to you to keep it filled. 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.



Left: Brendon Wegers, 19, loads a Turkish fir for a customer at the McLean Road Tree Farm in Mount Vernon.

Right: Jodi Monroe helps customer David Putnam haul a freshly cut Fraser fir Wednesday also at the McLean Road Tree Farm. Freshly cut trees should be placed in water as soon as they are taken home to keep them fresh as long as possible. *Photos by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald.*

“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 as many as 40 different pesticides!” according to Katherine P. Maloney, Area Director for NE State & Private Forestry for the USDA. Maloney advises, “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 to buy a potted rosemary plant from a nursery. The needles smell wonderful, and you can hang lights and ornaments on the branches.

Whichever holiday plants you choose, make sure to give them adequate water. Treat them well, and they will last for weeks or longer, creating beauty that will last throughout the holiday season.



Left: Needles on this tree are green and healthy. **Center:** A holiday cactus thrives with warm, moist indoor temperatures and indirect light. **Right:** To initiate new blooms, your holiday cactus needs 12 hours of complete darkness daily for six to eight weeks. *Photos by Trish Varrelman / 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.

Holiday Cactus

- This cactus should be grown in bright, indirect light.
- Mist the plant weekly to increase humidity.
- Ideal temperatures are around 70°F during the day and 60-65°F at night.
- Do not fertilize while plants are in flower. Resume fertilization once a month from April to September.
- After flowers drop, pinch back each stem to promote more branching.
- In September, to initiate new blooms, place plant in complete darkness from 8 PM - 8 AM for 6 - 8 weeks until buds form.

* Above information courtesy of the University of Illinois Extension Service

RESOURCES:

- “Caring for Poinsettias and Christmas Trees.” University of Nebraska Extension Service. <http://lancaster.unl.edu/hort/articles/2005/christmasplants.shtml>
- “Treat Your Christmas Tree to Vodka? Only if you want to waste it” Oregon State University Extension Service. <https://today.oregonstate.edu/news/treat-your-christmas-tree-vodka-only-if-you-want-waste-it>
- “Care of Holiday Plants.” Penn State Extension. <https://extension.psu.edu/care-of-holiday-plants>
- “Post-Holiday Plant Care.” Husker Hort <https://huskerhort.com/2016/12/26/post-holiday-plant-care/>

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.