

Living Christmas Trees

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Start a new Christmas tradition this year

If you're interested in helping to create an increasingly sustainable environment, consider purchasing a living Christmas tree this year. It's a great option if you want a "real" tree, but don't want to purchase and then discard a cut tree.

Most nurseries sell varieties of spruce, pine and fir that are either potted or available in a burlap-covered root ball. In both instances, the plant root systems should have been sufficiently pruned during the growing process to allow for successful transplanting. If the tree is balled and burlapped, make sure that the trunk and root ball are undamaged.

Spending a little time researching trees and planning is a good investment if you're considering a living tree. Select a variety that grows well in the Pacific Northwest, know where you will plant it, and understand how to care for the tree before making a final decision. Be sure to consider the characteristics of the tree before purchasing it—including its size at maturity and whether it is suitable to be replanted on your property.

If you don't have the right space to replant the tree, consider donating it to a local parks department, church, school, community or environmental organization—but make this decision before you purchase the tree, as it will need to be replanted as soon as possible after Christmas. Another option is to rent a living tree; check with your local nursery to find out what's possible if that interests you.

Purchase your tree from a reliable nursery rather than a "big box" store so that you can find out where the tree was harvested and ensure that it's in good condition. In addition, nursery staff can provide information about the variety you select, what your plans are for the tree after the holidays, and how to care for it.

Living trees are much heavier than cut trees (a typical 5-foot tree weighs about 150 pounds). Living trees range in size from two to six feet in height, although commonly they are four or five feet tall. The younger a tree is, the more likely it will readily adapt to the outdoor/indoor/outdoor transition.

Living trees require special care from purchase to replanting if they are to survive. They should be treated more tenderly than cut trees, including how they are transported. As soon as you get the tree home, water it, and make sure that it stays damp until replanting time. Leave your tree outside for at least a week in a cool, sheltered area before you bring it into the house. The tree has been harvested in the cold and has already gone into a dormant state, so leaving it outside in

a protected place will retain the dormancy until you are ready to bring it inside. Plan to have your living tree in the house for no longer than a week or ten days—the longer it is inside, the more it will acclimate to the warmer environment, decreasing its chances for survival.



Many families have developed a tradition of bringing the tree indoors for decoration on Christmas Eve.
Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.

According to Colorado State University (CSU) Extension, there are two critical factors for successfully growing a live potted tree. First, do not allow the root system to dry out—it must stay damp (but not soggy) the entire time it's in the house. If the tree is unpotted, wrap the root ball in plastic or wet sphagnum moss. Second, do not keep the tree indoors for too long. Some sources suggest a week or less; others indicate no more than ten days.

Many families have developed a tradition of bringing the tree indoors for decoration on Christmas Eve and planting it outdoors on New Year's Day (CSU). When you bring the tree indoors, be sure to place it in a draft-free location away from any source of heat, such as a fireplace, heat vent or television. It's best to not use lights on your tree; however, if you do, use small LED lights and minimize the number of ornaments on the tree in order to reduce the stress on the tree.

When you are ready to move the tree out of the house, place it in a protected outdoor location for at least one week before replanting, if possible. While the tree is indoors it may begin to emerge from its dormant state because of the temperature and needs to return to dormancy before being replanted.



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When you replant your tree, remove it from the container or burlap and loosen the root system so that the roots are outwardly directed in the way that they will naturally grow. Check with the nursery where the tree was purchased regarding the correct depth for replanting. The hole should be at the right depth and width to accommodate the spread out root system. Water the tree well and add about three inches of mulch to help keep the soil and roots moist.

Living Christmas trees require more planning and work than cut or artificial trees, but knowing that your tree will continue to live and contribute to the beauty and sustainability of your community can make it worth that extra effort.

Furthermore, it's an opportunity for children to learn about how to care for trees. Who knows—you may start a new, long-standing family Christmas tradition!

RESOURCES:

- <http://www.gardenknowhow.com>
- Nix, Steve (2019, May). "Using a Living Christmas Tree With the Intention to Replant." ThoughtCo.

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