

From The Bedford Extension Master Gardener HELP DESK

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QUESTION: SHOULD I BUY A LIVING CHRISTMAS TREE?

The Help Desk rarely receives requests for horticultural information / assistance in December. Thus I thought I would revisit the issue of whether to buy a “living” Christmas tree, and if so how to care for it over the holidays and when / how to plant it.

RECOMMENDATION

The following factors should be taken into consideration when deciding whether or not to buy a “living” Christmas tree:

Suitability of tree to central Virginia: Is the species of your living Christmas tree well adapted to our environment?

Popular holiday trees are often spruces and firs, which are not well adapted to central Virginia. However, with careful and proper site selection as well as diligent care given over the years by the landowner, spruce and firs can work in our landscapes.

Mature size and planting location: Is there a place in your landscape where it makes sense to plant the tree after the holiday season is over? In order to figure out the best planting location of the tree you will need to know the type and variety of tree you are planning on getting, as well as how tall and wide the mature tree will be.



photo: okeechobee.ifas.ufl.edu

Transporting the tree home: Will you be able to get the tree home without dropping the tree or damaging the roots? Balled and burlapped trees should not be carried by their stems because the weight of the root ball can exert pressure on the roots and break them. It is best to pick the tree up by the ball itself or to roll the ball along the ground.

Conditioning and bringing in the tree: Do you have a barn or unheated garage where you can place the tree upright for a couple of days to get it conditioned before bringing it inside? Once inside can the tree be placed in a cool location? Living Christmas trees should be kept out of direct sunlight and away from heat sources such as wood stoves, fireplaces, heater vents, etc.



photo: <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu>

Watering the tree: Will you be able to keep the root ball moist both outside and inside while the tree is being displayed? Do you have a bucket or pan large enough in which to place the root ball to prevent soil and water from staining the floor? Living Christmas trees will need water, although not nearly as much as cut trees. Before moving the tree inside, the root ball should be moistened and kept in a moist condition while the tree is displayed.

Short duration of time the tree can be kept inside: How long do you or your family like to keep the decorated Christmas tree “up”? Living Christmas trees are fairly sensitive and should not be kept inside for more than 10 days. Exposure to the warm temperatures may cause the dormant tree to break buds and start to grow, which you don’t want. In addition, before removing the tree directly outside, it should be allowed to recondition in the same manner as when it was brought inside. After a couple of days, it should be ready to plant.

Planting the tree: If the ground is frozen or if the tree cannot be planted immediately, do you have a sheltered area where it can be placed and the root ball heavily mulched? When planting, the hole should be dug about the depth of the root ball and 1.5 to 2 times the diameter. In heavy clay soil, the hole can even be dug 1 or 2 inches shallower than the root ball. The tree should be placed in the hole, backfilled with the soil removed from the hole, watered, and mulched with straw, bark, sawdust, etc. The tree will remain dormant for the rest of the winter and then will start to grow normally with other vegetation in the spring. [1]

RESOURCE LINKS

[1] <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/420/420-641/420-641.html> (accessed 11/20/2015)

Answers provided herein were based on specific situations and growing conditions.

These recommendations may or may not be appropriate for all circumstances.

For specific recommendations for your particular situation please contact your local Cooperative Extension Office.

MASTER GARDENER HELP DESK:

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