

Hunting for the Perfect Christmas Tree

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After you have finished digesting your Thanksgiving dinner and braved the crowds for holiday shopping, you may be thinking of unpacking your Christmas decorations and putting up a tree. Decorating Christmas trees for the winter season is a time-honored tradition dating back to the year 1510 in Riga, Latvia, located in northern Europe. Nationally, about 30 million real trees are used for Christmas annually.



You may have stuck with artificial trees for years for fear of ending up like a scene in National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation, but buying a real tree can be a well-remembered experience for all members of the family. There are several options and factors to consider when selecting a tree.

When it comes to real trees, you can buy a potted live tree, cut down your own at a local u-cut Christmas tree farm, or buy from a retail store or tent sale. A live Christmas tree still has the roots attached, so you can buy it and decorate in your home and plant it outside in January. The species that are well-adapted for Florida's climate include red cedar, Arizona cypress, sand pine, and junipers. Make sure that the soil is kept moist. Live trees should only be kept in the house for around 10 days to increase its survival rate.

When you are choosing a tree, know the size and height of the area where you will place the tree. Take into account the extra room that a tree topper and tree stand (or pot) will take when looking at trees. If you plan to decorate the tree with heavy ornaments, you will want to choose a pine or fir variety since they have stronger branches.

All real trees will lose needles after they are cut, but there are some ways to minimize the amount of needles lost. If you get a tree from a retail store or tent, you can test it for freshness using a few simple methods. You can stroke the branch and see how many needles come out, the fewer the better. You can also tap the trunk firmly on the ground; only a few inner needles should come out. The tree should look green and healthy, having a pleasant scent when you break a needle.

Since the needles fall out as the tree dries up, you can retain moisture in the tree with these easy tips. If you are buying a tree from a tent sale or store, see if they can cut the stump before you leave. If not, you can cut it yourself. Get the tree in some water within the hour after the tree is cut or the tree will develop a seal a pitch and will not be able to absorb water. Moist trees are less likely to catch fire, but keep it away from heat sources that will dry it out. If you are not ready to decorate it, place it in a cool area like the porch or garage in a bucket of water.

Once you are ready to decorate it, place it in a tree stand with ample water in the stand. You can put a tree skirt around it to collect the needles. Trees can absorb up to a gallon of water a day, so make sure that there is always water in the stand. Do not put lighted candles on the tree, so that it doesn't catch on fire.

Dispose of your tree once it becomes dry to avoid a fire hazard. Do not burn the tree in the fireplace since it can cause creosote buildup. Christmas trees can be recycled and are often ground into mulch. Most can be taken during trash pickup, although they may not be taken if ornaments or tinsel are left on them. They can also be taken to any of the county's rural recycling centers.

There are several tree farms in and around Gainesville. To find Christmas tree farms for u-cut and living trees, visit

<http://www.flchristmastrees.com/Farms/Index.htm>. For more information on taking care of your Christmas tree, visit <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/>.