

Take Good Care of that Christmas Tree

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

There are many legitimate and very good reasons to have an artificial Christmas tree. But for many of us, nothing beats the look, the feel and the smell of a real Christmas tree! It doesn't matter whether it's a Virginia pine, a Douglas fir, a Fraser fir or a cedar you cut out of your own pasture, there's just something special about a real Christmas tree.

But it is very important that you take steps to keep that tree as fresh as possible. A real Christmas tree, of any species, is a potential fire hazard no matter how fresh you keep it. The same oils and resins that make a real tree smell so good are simply quite flammable. If that tree gets dried out, it becomes a Roman candle. So it behooves everyone who has a real Christmas tree to take steps to get a fresh tree and then keep it fresh.

Ideally, you would visit a local Christmas tree farm and cut your own tree. It isn't going to get any fresher than that! There are also mail order suppliers that cut the tree and put it on the truck the same day so when it arrives at your home a few days later, you know it's still fairly fresh. But many families are going to buy their Christmas tree at a tree lot.

It would be great if you'd wait until only a week before Christmas to put up your tree. The shorter the period that the tree is in your house, the less chance it has to dry out. Unfortunately, you are probably going to have to rush out NOW to get a good one though, before they are all gone. Sometimes a Christmas tree farm will let you buy and tag a tree now and then come back closer to Christmas to cut it and take it home. Just remember, no matter what you do, the minute the tree is cut it is starting to die and you are just trying to prolong that ultimate end as long as possible!

There's a couple of really quick ways to tell if a tree is still fairly fresh. First of all pick it up and thump the cut end on the ground a couple of times. There's always going to be a few needles fall off, but if it's a literal downpour of needles, put it back and move on! If you find one you like that isn't losing many needles, take a single needle off the tree and bend it between your thumb and finger. A needle from a fresh tree should bend fairly easily. If it snaps like a matchstick, it's already getting too dried out. Put the tree back and move on.

When an evergreen tree is cut, a small amount of sap oozes out the cut surface, dries up and seals over in an effort to reduce moisture loss. Once you get the tree home, this seal needs to be removed. Get the area in your house cleared and the tree stand ready for the tree. Then, just before bringing it in, cut about a half inch off the bottom of the tree trunk. This removes the dried sap seal and allows the tree to take up water. If you never do this, you may not have to water the tree at all as it won't be taking up any water. Cut that end off, get the tree in the stand and fill it up with water.

There have been a lot of different additives made and sold over the years to keep your Christmas tree fresh. There has been a great deal of disagreement about how much good these do and I'm not necessarily sold on any of them. But the one thing that the tree needs is a constant supply of water. If the end of that tree comes out of the water for any length of time, it may seal back over and quit taking up water. Check the water level three or four times a day until you have a feel for how often it needs to be filled. Then keep it filled daily and try to get the tree down and out of the house as soon after Christmas as you can.