

Selecting and Caring for Your Real Christmas Tree

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Many folks have legitimate reasons to have an artificial Christmas tree. But for many of us it just isn't the same at Christmas if you don't have a real Christmas tree! If you haven't already, many of you will soon be buying a real Christmas tree. Unless you go out and cut your own tree from a Christmas tree farm, which I strongly encourage, it's hard to know where the tree came from and how long it's been since it was cut. So dryness or rather freshness of the tree is a real issue. Let's go over a few tips and tricks that can help you select a fresh tree and keep it as fresh as possible.

Before you even go out to select your tree, measure the space where you are going to place it. Make sure that you buy a tree that will fit into that space. Also make sure that the tree you buy fits your base. Not all Christmas tree species are the same. White pines are soft and pretty, but they don't hold larger, heavier ornaments well. The following species are noted to have good needle retention: white spruce, Fraser fir, Colorado blue spruce, concolor fir, balsam fir, Scotch pine, and noble fir.

Different species have different ways of telling you if they are fresh. Bend some of the needles. If the tree is a pine, the needles should bend without breaking. If pine needles break, the tree is dry. On other species, though, it's just the opposite. Green needles on fresh trees break crisply when bent sharply. Think of how a fresh carrot reacts. Stick your nose into the tree and take a good sniff. If it smells musty, put it back. Check the bark to see if it looks fresh. If it is starting to look all wrinkly, put it back.

The sooner you get to the tree lot after it has opened, the fresher the tree probably is. Ask if they know when the trees were cut. Look for trees that are stored in the shade which keeps them cooler and reduces moisture loss. Finally, if you are doubting the freshness of a tree, just move on to another one. If you are buying your tree from a tree farm, ask the grower lots of questions as they will be very knowledgeable about their trees!

Once you get the tree home, the critical factor is water. Make a fresh cut to remove the bottom one half inch from the base of the trunk. Make the cut perpendicular to the trunk. A cut made at an angle or a V shaped cut will not increase water uptake, will make it more difficult to put into most stands and can actually decrease the amount of water the tree will take up. Drilling a hole in the base of the stem won't increase water uptake either. It will take several hours for the fresh cut to seal up, so take your time when setting up your tree to make sure that it is secure and won't fall over.

The first few days your tree will probably take up a lot of water. Check it three to four times a day. In many stands there can still be water in the stand but it will be below the level of the tree base. Additives to the water, such as bleach and sugar, really don't improve the life of the tree. The secret is to make sure it always has lots of water.

Finally, keep the tree out of direct sunlight. Keep it away from heat sources such as fireplaces, wood stoves, heaters and furnace vents. Only use lights that produce low heat. The older style lights produced enough heat that they would dry out the tree faster. The newer LED lights are a great improvement! Then always shut the lights off when you are leaving the house or going to bed. If the tree becomes dry, get it out of the house! It is just too much of a hazard at that time. Enjoy your real Christmas tree this season, but stay safe!