

Ready or Not, It's Christmas Tree Time

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Thanksgiving is behind us and it's no holds barred into Christmas from here! Which for many households means putting up the Christmas tree. For some, that means pulling the box out of the attic and putting up the artificial Christmas tree. But for many of us, the holiday just isn't the same without a real Christmas tree to provide that look, that touch, that smell, and all the needles all over the carpet.

Real Christmas trees, are, well, real. They are a living breathing plant that once cut from the stump, start to slowly die. Now don't get all caught up in the idea that you are killing a living tree. On average there are 3 new Christmas trees planted across the country for every one that is cut down. But it does become necessary for you to take the best care possible of that tree to keep it as fresh as possible for as long as possible. You want to avoid it becoming a serious fire hazard or losing all of it's needles all over your floor!

Evergreen trees, and this includes our native red cedar, contain resins. These resins are highly flammable. Resins aren't part of the sap of the tree, but they are inside most parts of the evergreen tree. As trees dry out, they do become more flammable. Additionally, the leaves (needles) of evergreens have a lot of surface area and as the needles dry out, their flammability increases rapidly. Your goal is to obtain a tree that is as fresh as possible and then do everything you can to keep it as fresh as possible.

In a perfect world you would drive out to a Christmas tree farm, cut your tree down, immediately bring it home and put it up in your tree stand. That's not what most of us do though. Second best option is to order online and have it shipped fresh to your home. There are Christmas tree farms who will cut your tree and ship it the same day getting it to your home a few days later. But more than likely you will end up in a Christmas tree lot somewhere and the search is on looking for just the right tree, but equally important, finding one that is fresh!

When you think you've found the right tree, grab it by the trunk and give it a good thump on the ground. If needles fall off the tree like Charlie Brown's Christmas tree, but it back and keep looking. A few needles falling off is not uncommon but there shouldn't be a small pile under the tree. Take a needle off the tree and bend it between your thumb and finger. If it snaps like a toothpick, it's a sign that the tree has gotten very dry. Put it back and keep looking.

Once you find a tree that is the right shape and size, and seems to be fairly fresh, the race is on! You want to take it home and get it into a reservoir of water as soon as possible. Remember those resins that I mentioned a bit ago? When the tree was cut from the stump, those resins, and the sap, ooze out the end of the tree and then dry up. They form a seal over the end of the tree to reduce moisture loss from the cut surface. The tree won't be able to take up water until that seal is removed. Either at the tree lot, or as soon as you get it home, cut off ½ to 1 inch of the end of the tree and then get it in water as soon as possible to prevent it from sealing back over.

Even if you don't decorate the tree for several days, immediately get it into water. The first week or so the tree may take up a lot of water so check the water reservoir two or three times a day. Water uptake will slow down as the season progresses. Special additives in the water aren't necessary, just keep the reservoir full of water. All of these things will help you have a fresher Christmas tree to enhance your enjoyment of the Christmas season!