

## Keeping Your Christmas Tree Fresh

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I know. It's only the middle of November. Why am I talking about Christmas trees already? It comes down to some basic timing. Thanksgiving is as late as it can be this year (remember it's the fourth Thursday of November, not the last Thursday of November.) Thanksgiving is on December 28<sup>th</sup> and many families will spend time immediately after Thanksgiving Day buying and decorating their Christmas tree. If I want to provide you with some good information on buying a fresh Christmas tree and keeping it fresh I need to do that BEFORE you go shopping for a tree. I can't wait until next Sunday's column because I need to write my happy Thanksgiving column for that week. So you get Christmas trees this week!

With that said, if your tree comes from a box in the garage or attic, you can just turn the page and go on to something else. This is about REAL Christmas trees. By the way, Christmas trees are a renewable resource. For every one harvested each year several more are planted. And in the years that they are growing, they are producing oxygen and tying up carbon thereby removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Most real Christmas trees are not wild harvested but cut from fields where they are grown like any other crop.

Since a Christmas tree is a living thing you want it to be as fresh as possible. If you live near one you can go to a Christmas tree farm and cut it so it's as fresh as possible. There are also places who will cut your tree and ship it the next day so it arrives just a few days off the stump. But many people wind up going to a Christmas tree lot or from a local store that brings in trees. Some of these may have been recently cut, others may have been cut weeks ago, so you need to do some simple tests to see how fresh it is.

First thing to do is give the tree a good hard thump on the ground to see how many needles fall off. A few are okay, especially if they seem to be coming out of the middle of the tree. If a lot fall off, move on. Grab a few needles and break them in your fingers then give them a smell. Fresh needles will have a lot of scent while badly dried up needles may not have much scent at all. Fresh pine needles tend to bend while fresh fir and spruce needles tend to break which is why smelling is often a better approach. Lastly, make sure that the size of the base of the tree will fit in your tree stand!

When evergreen trees are cut, their resinous sap will ooze out of the cut and very quickly seal over the cut plugging up the vessels that transport water. While this slows down how fast the tree will dry out, it also means that when you get it home you will need to cut off 3/8 to 1/2 inch of the trunk just before you put it in the tree stand. This removes those sap plugs and allows the tree to once again start taking up water. While there have been many things promoted to add to the water to help keep trees fresher, the most important thing is just water. The first few days the tree is in the stand it is likely to take up a lot of water so be sure to check it three or four times a day and add water regularly. After the first few days water use should slow down and you should be fine checking it in the morning and evening.

The tree will dry out as you go through the Christmas season so by the end of December it is going to be fairly dry. While everyone certainly enjoys the ambiance of a real Christmas tree, don't push it to far as it will become a fire hazard. Real Christmas trees are a nice touch but be sure to keep them fresh and safe!