

How do I Care for a Real Christmas Tree?

By Dr. John Ball, Assistant Professor, Horticulture, Forestry, Landscape and Parks Department, and Dr. David Graper, Extension Horticulturist

During the holiday season, thousands of South Dakotans will continue the tradition of decorating a real Christmas tree. Gifts displayed beneath a fresh, fragrant, well-lit tree are a key part of many holiday memories.

Sometimes people decide not to have a real Christmas tree and purchase an artificial tree instead. Often this is done because of a concern about fire safety. Real Christmas trees are not the fire risk that many believe.

The key to having a safe tree is to buy a fresh tree and keep it fresh.

According to the U.S. Forest Service Forest Products Laboratory, fresh Christmas trees that are kept watered are not easily combustible. Christmas tree buyers should realize that artificial trees also can pose a fire risk.

The other concern sometimes mentioned is cutting trees for Christmas. Today, most Christmas trees are grown on farms as a crop rather than being harvested from forests. Sometimes, however, trees are harvested from natural forest stands. Ponderosa pine may be harvested from crowded natural stands in the Black Hills. This harvesting gives the remaining trees more space and encourages better growth.

Picking out the Tree

Not all Christmas trees are the same. Some species retain their needles longer than other species. For a list of the characteristics of the most common Christmas trees and how to identify the trees, see Extension Extra 6013, Christmas Tree Selection.

Pre-cut Christmas Trees

Pre-cut trees may be shipped in to South Dakota from many areas of the Midwest and sold in Christmas tree lots across the state. The secret of having a long-lasting tree begins with buying fresh. Christmas trees begin losing moisture as soon as they are cut. If you are shopping at a retail stand, look for trees that have been properly stored. Cut trees maintain their freshness best if stored in a cool, shaded area. The trees also should not be stacked so tight that branches might be broken.

Once you have picked out the pre-cut tree you like, examine it for freshness, since some trees may have been cut months ago. Gently shake the tree. If the tree is fresh, very few exterior needles will fall off. Do not be concerned if some of the older, interior needles fall. This is normal. Also check individual needles for freshness. Break off a needle near the tip of a branch and bend it. The needle should bend slightly without breaking. If the needle snaps, the tree is dry.

Most pine trees sold in our state have been tinted. This green colorant masks the normal winter yellowing that occurs on some of the pines. The colorant also helps hold moisture in the tree, which helps maintain the freshness of the tree.

Choose-and-cut Christmas Trees

One of the best and most enjoyable way to assure yourself a fresh, long-lasting Christmas tree is to go to one of the many choose-and-cut Christmas tree farms throughout South Dakota. Selecting and cutting your own tree at a Christmas tree farm guarantees that you will be getting a fresh tree. Many families have made cutting their own tree each Christmas a tradition.

After the Tree is Home

If you are not going to set the tree up immediately in the house, store it in a cool, dark place, such as a garage. If the storage room is above freezing, placing the base of the tree in water will prolong its freshness. Cut the base of the tree at a slight angle about 1 inch above the old cut, then place the base in the water.

Before you bring the tree into the house, select the display location carefully. Do not set the tree over or under a heat vent, nor near a fireplace. A location away from a window also is preferred. Keeping the tree in a cool location will reduce water loss and extend the freshness of the tree.

Another important consideration is to have a good tree stand. Tree stands should hold at least a gallon of water to prevent the tree from drying out. It is not uncommon for a fresh cut tree to take up to 1/4 to 1/2 gallon of water a day during the first week and perhaps a total of 3 to 7 gallons over a four-week period.

When the tree is brought in, cut the base of the tree about one inch above the original cut. The original cut is usually filled with pitch and will not readily absorb water. The new cut will open the pores and quickly allow water to be carried up to the needles.

Once the tree is securely set in the stand, add water. The temperature of the water is not important. People once believed that warm water would be taken up quicker into the stem, however, studies have shown that there is no difference in uptake between cold, cool, warm, and hot water.

Maintaining a supply of water to the tree's base is the most important way to keep the tree fresh. Studies have shown that a tree left without water will dry out in 8 to 14 days, while a tree with constant supply of water can maintain fresh needles 30 days or more. However, certain trees, like spruce, may begin to drop needles after 3 weeks, even with good care.

Sometimes people add aspirin or other preservatives to the water to extend the freshness of the tree. Most home recipes do not work, and commercial preservatives are not necessary.

After the Holidays

The use of a real Christmas tree is not over when the decorations come down. Real trees can be recycled into a number of different uses. Some people place the tree in the backyard and use it as a winter bird feeder. Groups often collect tree to put in lakes as artificial reefs. The trees also can be chipped and the chips used as organic mulch around shrubs and flowers. Pine mulch is an excellent mulch in South Dakota because the needles and wood chips help acidify the soil and provide a better growing environment for plants.

