

Selection and Care of Fresh Christmas Trees

*Elaine Cameron
Angelina Master Gardener*

Christmas trees are the most beloved of our holiday traditions. We all have fond memories of gathering around a fragrant, beautifully decorated tree with our families. One snowy December day when I was eight, I saw my father pass the school with a tree tied to his truck on the way home from the feed co-op. The anticipation of decorating the tree made it hard to concentrate the rest of the day.

To ensure a happy, safe holiday fresh Christmas trees require careful selection and care. Dry evergreens are highly flammable and can quickly engulf a room in flames.

A fresh tree will be fragrant; needles will feel resilient and will not drop off at a gentle touch. The National Christmas Tree Association's (NCTA) press release recommends testing freshness by gently grasping a branch between your thumb and forefinger and pulling it toward you. If the tree is fresh very few needles will come off in your hand. Bouncing the tree on its trunk should not cause it to shed an excessive amount of green needles. The NCTA also said some loss of interior brown needles is normal and will occur over the lifetime of the tree.

Cut about one-half inch off the bottom of the trunk to remove the crusty seal that has formed over the cut end. Place the tree in water immediately and store in a shady, protected spot until you are ready to decorate.

Choose a stand large enough to hold one quart of water for every inch of trunk diameter. According to the NCTA "Water holding stands that are kept filled with plain water will extend the freshness of trees for weeks." Trees will take up more water during the first week, so check the water levels frequently. If the water level falls below the cut

end drying will begin. The NCTA recommends not adding anything to the water, stating research has shown plain tap water is by far the best for the tree's moisture retention.

Place your tree in an area away from heat registers, space heaters, fireplaces, wood stoves and other heat sources, to slow moisture loss and evaporation. Make sure the tree does not block foot traffic or doorways.

Here are a few safety tips from a National Safety Council fact sheet on Tree Lights:

- Only use indoor lights indoors (and outdoor lights only outdoors). Look for the UL label. Check lights for broken or cracked sockets, frayed or bare wires, or loose connections. Replace any damaged light sets.
- Also, use no more than three light sets on any one extension cord. Extension cords should be placed against the wall to avoid tripping hazards, but do not run cords under rugs.
- Turn off all lights on trees and decorations when you go to bed or leave the house.

For more information visit the National Christmas Tree Association website at www.realchristmastrees.org, and the National Safety Council website at www.nsc.org/library/facts/xmastree, or call the Angelina County Extension Office at 634-6414.

The Angelina County 4-H Clubs are selling fresh Christmas trees at the Randall's Parking lot. Proceeds will benefit the 4-H scholarship fund.

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