



## HOLIDAY PLANT SELECTION & CARE by County Extension Agent Tripp Williams

Live Christmas trees have been brought into homes and decorated during the holiday season for more than 500 years. Each year, more than 33 million live Christmas trees are used in households across the United States. Live Christmas trees have an attractiveness, fragrance, and tradition that cannot be matched with artificial substitutes.

Christmas trees are grown throughout the United States and Canada, and you can choose your tree from a wide variety of species. It takes five to 12 years to grow a Christmas tree, and for each tree harvested, two or three seedlings will be planted.

You can select your live Christmas tree from a local retail lot, where there can be a variety of trees from the United States and Canada. Or you can visit a local choose-n-cut Christmas tree farm to cut a fresh tree from the field where it was grown.

### Selecting Your Tree

Keep these points in mind when choosing a specific tree:

- Check the height of the ceiling in the room where you will display your tree. Select a tree that is at least one foot shorter than the ceiling height.
- Run your fingers over the branch along the needles. Needles should be pliable and adhere to the branches. They should bend, but not break or fall off.
- Shake or bounce the tree to be sure that the needles are firmly attached. If the tree is fresh, few needles should fall off. Some loss of needles inside the tree is common.
- Avoid trees that have a wilted look.
- Make sure the handle (base of the trunk) of the tree is straight. The handle must be six to eight inches long to allow placement in the tree stand.
- Check for insects and dead needles inside the tree crown. Have dead needles shaken or blown out when you buy the tree.

### Caring for the Tree in Your Home

If you don't plan to put the tree up right away, cut one inch off of the base, put the tree in a bucket of water and stand it in a shady place.

When you bring the tree indoors, cut 1/2 to one inch off of the base of the trunk and place in a tree stand that holds at least one gallon of water. Make the cut perpendicular to the stem axis. Don't cut the trunk at an angle, or into a v-shape, which makes it far more difficult to hold the tree in the stand and also reduces the amount of water available to the tree.

Do not place the tree near a fireplace, heater vents or other heat sources.

**Never let the water level fall below the base of the tree.** If this occurs, the cut end can seal over, preventing further water uptake. The tree must then be taken down and a fresh cut made to allow water uptake.

Drilling a hole in the base of the trunk does not improve water uptake.

Adding floral preservatives, commercial tree preservatives, aspirin, soda water, bleach or sugar to the water in the tree stand is no more effective in keeping the tree fresh than adding plain water each day.

A well cared for tree should normally remain fresh for four to six weeks before drying to an unacceptable level.

### **Fireproofing Your Tree**

The best way to keep a tree fresh and fire resistant is to keep it supplied with water at all times. Displaying trees in water with proper care is much more effective in reducing fire hazards than spraying trees with flame retardants. Some flame retardants can damage needles and actually increase the rate of moisture loss from trees and is not recommended.

A fresh tree supplied with water presents little fire hazard. As long as the tree takes up water, it will be relatively fire resistant. Check to make sure the tree is up taking water. Trees may use several quarts of water a day. If not, another cut may be warranted.

Do not allow the water level in the tree stand to fall below the base of the tree.

Trees can be sprayed with anti-transpirants, which are clear films that slow water loss from the needles. Applying anti-transpirants to the tree does not have a significant effect on the rate of moisture loss. These products are marketed as a way to block evaporation from the foliage surface but in reality they have little effect on a cut tree displayed indoors.

Use only UL-approved lights and nonflammable decorations.

Never leave home or go to bed with the Christmas tree lights on.

### **Using Your Tree After Christmas**

- Grind the tree for mulch.
- Use the main stem to burn in the fireplace after removing branches and needles.
- Create a fish attractor by weighting the base of the tree and sinking it in a pond.

## **Care for Holiday & Gift Plants by County Extension Agent Tripp Williams**

**Poinsettias** are one of the most popular potted plants in the USA grown specifically for the Christmas market. It is found in many homes and businesses during the winter holidays in a wide array of colors: red, pink, white and variegated varieties. The showy colored parts of poinsettias that most people think are the flowers are actually modified leaves called bracts. The true flowers are the yellowish button-like structures in the center of the bracts. When choosing a poinsettia, avoid plants with yellow pollen shedding from the flower clusters. Poinsettias drop their colorful bracts soon after shedding pollen. Carefully wrap plants when bringing new purchases home because brief exposure to cold temperatures can result in dropped leaves and bracts. They should be placed in a warm, sunny location away from cold drafts or heat sources.



**Poinsettias** need a daytime temperature of 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Reduce this to low 60's at night. Put poinsettias in bright light, but never in full sun. Select areas where the plant will not dry out. If placed in a window, remove it at night so it will not get too cold. Let the soil

surface dry slightly between watering and then water until it runs out of the bottom of the pot. Poinsettias are very sensitive to environment. Drafts, cold, heat, dim light, low humidity or improper watering may cause these plants to wilt or shed leaves and flowers.

**Amaryllis** are generally available for Christmas. They bloom for four to six weeks and are available in orange, red, white, and pink. A large bulb may produce more than one flower stalk. Amaryllis requires bright light, cool conditions and moist soils. Bulbs bloom four to six weeks after planting. Individual flowers last three to four days, but a plant may have two flower stalks with three to four flowers per stalk.

To re-bloom an amaryllis, let the leaves grow normally in a well-lit warm location. Put them outside in the spring and summer. Allow the foliage to fully develop and fertilize and water throughout the summer months. In early fall the leaves begin to die back, slowly and eventually stop watering. Once the leaves have died back prune them back to the bulb and allow the soil to dry. Store the bulb in a cool, dry place for four to eight weeks. To resuming growth start watering. You should see a new stalk and flower set in four to six weeks.

**Holiday Cacti** come in three types which bloom at different times of the year. Depending on type, they flower at Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter. All three require bright light, well-drained soils and moderate moisture levels. South facing windows are good places for holiday cacti.



After bloom, remove faded flowers and fertilize. They can be grown outside in spring and summer in shady locations. Stem pieces of three segments or more root easily.

Holiday cacti flowering are based on day length and temperature so they should bloom at the same time every year. You may need to restrict very bright artificial lights at night during the time of blossom development (September and October for Thanksgiving and Christmas Cacti or February and March for Easter Cacti).

During bloom development keep temperatures cool; 55 to 65 degrees at night and 5 to 10 degrees higher in the day. Keep the plants slightly on the dry side. Return slowly to normal watering after flower buds develop. Sudden changes in environment may cause the plant to shed flower buds.