

# Choosing the Perfect 'Live' Christmas Tree

There is magic in a live Christmas tree. You can feel and smell that magic in any home with a real Christmas tree. Polyethylene and aluminum trees just do not have that magical spark that make Christmas spirit. Take one live Christmas tree, add poinsettias, a "hot" woodstove, some homemade eggnog, good friends, mix thoroughly, and Christmas spirit will flood through the house. However, choosing the right tree is critical for the success of this recipe.

The average commercial Christmas tree will take 5 to 8 years to grow into a nicely shaped, 6-foot tree. Christmas trees require special pruning, fertilization, cultivation and colonization. Last year, more than 1 million Christmas trees were sold in North Carolina. Many of these trees came from northern growers that began harvesting trees in early November. North Carolina Christmas tree growers are doing a superb job of supplying high-quality fresh trees to market, so consider a freshly harvested North Carolina-grown tree first.

All live Christmas trees require water. The needles are still alive even though the tree has been cut. The vascular system or plumbing of the tree will continue to provide water to the needles several weeks after the tree is cut if the stump is placed in water. Once the needles are dried out, they are dead, and little can be done to revive them.

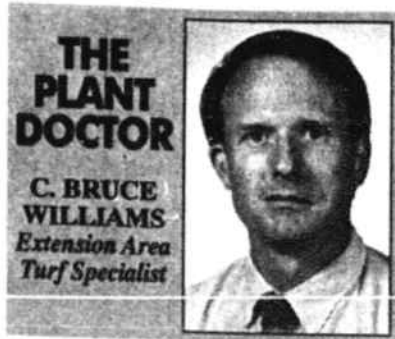
The Christmas tree of choice for many is the Fraser or Balsam fir. The firs have a fragrant aroma, dark-green foliage, strong branches to support ornaments and excellent needle retention. Many folks consider the firs to be the Cadillac of Christmas trees, and the price often reflects this image. The Douglas fir is a conifer but not a true fir. The Douglas fir resembles the Fraser and Balsam firs and also makes an excellent tree.

The white pine is a native to the mountains of western North Carolina. This tree has a soft blue-green color, pleasant fragrance and good needle retention. White pines tend to wilt more than other species and branches are weak for heavy ornamentation. However, when this tree is properly watered and pruned, there is no better Christmas tree.

The Scotch pine is the leading plantation-grown Christmas tree in the United States. This tree was originally planted for erosion control on poor soils. Proper cultivations and pruning will make a Cinderella out of this erosion fighter. Scotch pines have stiff branches and excellent needle retention but natural color is yellow green. Growers often use natural vegetable dyes to spray trees to enhance the color.

The Spruce is known worldwide for the clean fresh smell of its needles. The spruce has good branch structure for ornamentation but poor needle retention. If you decide on a spruce for Christmas, then make sure you have a fresh tree, because spruce needles are tough to get out of the carpet.

As a child, I remember walking the family farm in southside Virginia looking up and down the fence rows for the perfect red cedar Christmas tree. Red cedar has a fragrant smell but the needles and weak limbs are not conducive for heavy ornamenta-



**THE PLANT DOCTOR**  
C. BRUCE WILLIAMS  
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tion. Wild, native red cedars are perhaps the meanest of all Christmas trees to harvest and prepare for decoration. However, cultivated trees that are properly pruned and cultivated can be spectacularly beautiful. Provide plenty of water to the red cedar since these trees are especially prone to drying out.

A living Christmas tree also carries the spirit of Christmas. I have relatives that buy a balled-and-bur-lapped live Christmas tree every

year and with great ceremony plant the tree soon after the holidays. You can see Christmas past just by looking down their property line. However many living Christmas trees do not make it into the new year.

If you want a living Christmas tree for your landscape then choose the best species for area. South-eastern North Carolina is the "kiss of death" for nearly all the firs or white pines. The best living trees for this area include the Red Cedar,

Leyland Cypress, Scotch pine, or Deodar cedar. One of the most beautiful living Christmas trees I have ever seen was a shaped and pruned Deodar cedar.

Be sure to purchase your tree from a reputable local nursery that provides an adequate root ball or container. Unscrupulous vendors will sell living trees with small or inadequate root systems that will ensure an early demise to your living tree. A proper size root ball for a

five or six foot tree will be several feet in diameter and should weigh a hundred pounds or more! Once you have a living Christmas tree in your home be sure to provide plenty of water to the root ball. The warm temperatures and low humidity rapidly dry out even the best trees.

Merry Christmas and happy tree-hunting!

Send your gardening comments and questions to the Plant Doctor, P.O. Box 109, Bolivia NC 28422.



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