

Real Christmas Tree Is A Labor Of Love

If you think that growing Christmas trees is just a happy-go-lucky, gain-with-no-pain occupation, think again. Growing Christmas trees takes a great deal of time and requires expertise in farming, business and marketing.

The cultivation of Christmas trees is truly an all-American industry; over 90% of the 36 million real trees sold in America each year are grown in the U. S.

Contrary to popular belief, there's more to Christmas tree farming than simply planting a seedling and watching it grow. Christmas tree growing is a year-round job that takes a great deal of patience and diligence. It can take an average of seven years for a tree to reach a retail sale height of six feet. For the new grower, that means a long-time investment before he sees any return.

Typically the growing process begins in a nursery where superior seed is planted and grown to two-

year-old seedlings, and then transplanted to Christmas tree plantations.

The work for the grower continues—several times a year, the trees must be shaped and pruned to produce the full, conical trees that consumers demand.

During its growth period, the Christmas tree faces many hazards: too much or too little sun or rain; destruction by pests, disease, hail or fire; overgrowth of bush, vines and weeds; or theft from the fields.

At harvest time, the trees are tagged, cut, and bundled on trucks and railroad cars bound for retail lots around the country.

On choose and cut farms, trees remain in the field until selected and cut by individuals and families.

Both the choose and cut farm and the Christmas tree retail lot help renew the age-old tradition of selecting a real Christmas tree as the center of the holiday celebration.

Here Are Tips On Selection

"Buying it fresh and keeping it fresh are the most important things to remember about selecting and caring for your Christmas tree," says Lloyd Vander Streek, president of the National Christmas Tree Association. He suggests a few simple tests for checking a tree's freshness.

First, gently grasp a branch between your thumb and forefinger and pull it gently toward you. Few needles should come off in your hand if the tree is fresh. Second, take a look at the ground around the tree. You shouldn't see an excessive amount of green needles on the ground. Some loss of brown needles is normal.

Once you've chosen your tree, keep it in a sheltered, unheated area, such as a porch or garage until you are ready to decorate it.

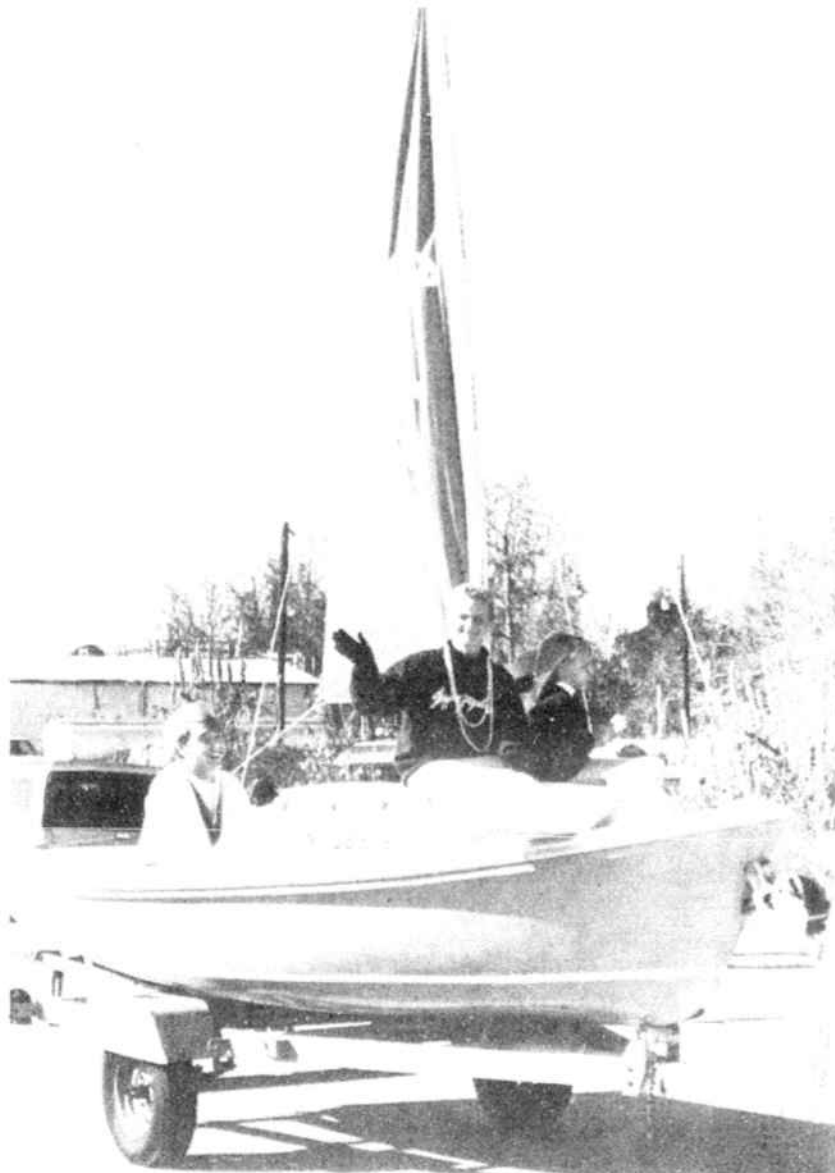
Before you set up your tree, make a fresh, straight cut across the base of the trunk (about a quarter of an

inch up from the original cut) and place the tree in a water-bearing stand. A tree will absorb as much as a gallon of water in the first 24 hours and one or more quarts a day thereafter. Water will prevent the needles from drying and the boughs from drooping.

Keep your tree away from heat and draft sources like a fireplace, radiator or television set. Test your light cords and connections before hanging them on the tree to make sure they're in good working order. And be sure to unplug them before you go to bed or leave the house.

Sensible precautions such as these help to preserve the unique beauty and tradition only a real Christmas tree can provide.

"Natural Christmas trees bring so much more pleasure to the Holiday," says Vander Streek. "That's why so many families choose a real tree as part of their celebration."

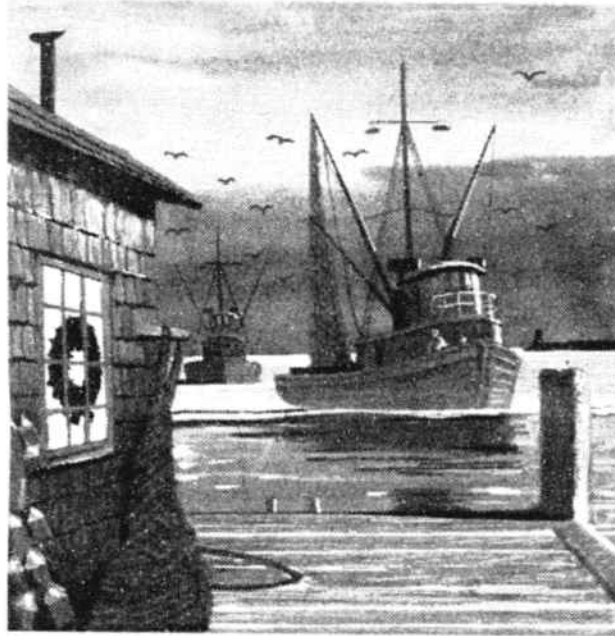


STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

Fish Out Of Water

A stunning mermaid was the main attraction aboard the Skippergraphics boat in the Shallotte Christmas Parade.

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