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## Home Care of Christmas Trees

Like many households in Illinois, your family will undoubtedly select and decorate a Christmas tree before Christmas Eve. It is to your advantage to buy a fresh tree and to care for it properly to insure its natural beauty, fragrance, and freshness throughout the holiday season.

### What Determines the Freshness of a Tree?

The freshness of a tree is directly related to the moisture content of its needles.

Once a Christmas tree is cut, its life functions cease. However, the tree will continue to function much like a wick in that it will absorb moisture through the stem if placed in water.

A freshly cut tree, generally, will average from 130 to 160 percent moisture measured on a dry weight basis. If an adequate water supply is not available to the tree to replace

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the moisture lost by transpiration, then the moisture content of the tree will decline. Generally, a tree that drops below 85 percent moisture will not regain its freshness.

## How To Identify a Fresh Tree

**Cutting your own tree.** Obviously, the safest way to obtain a fresh tree is to cut the tree yourself from a local grower's Christmas tree plantation.

**Buying from a reliable dealer.** Purchasing a tree from a reliable dealer or grower, one who readily gives information on when his trees were cut and delivered to the sales lot, is a good alternative.

**Determining freshness on the sales lot.** Freshness is an important factor to be considered when buying a tree. Although it is difficult for the inexperienced buyer to determine the freshness of trees on the lot, there are a few simple tests that will help in making this decision.

The following are characteristics of a fresh tree:

1. It has needles that are relatively pliable and firmly attached to the twigs. If the needles are brittle and tend to snap or shatter when bent between the fingers the tree is probably quite dry. During near-zero weather even a fresh tree will appear brittle and dry because the water freezes in the needles and they break easily.

2. It has a fresh, pungent fragrance.

3. It has a waxy, natural green appearance if it has not been sprayed with a needle colorant.

4. It has few loose green needles. If any quantity of green needles falls when the tree is shaken or bumped lightly on the ground, it's an indication the tree is dry.

The buyer should always use a discriminating eye when purchasing a tree, but should also respect the dealer's merchandise. Handle

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the trees with care when performing these tests so that they are not damaged for future sale.

**The 12-hour test.** If you question the freshness of the trees on a sales lot or if you doubt the reliability of the salesman, offer to purchase a tree with the agreement that you will return it if it does not use a reasonable amount of water in a 12-hour period.

The test is simple. As soon as you bring the tree home, cut off 1 or 1½ inches from the butt and promptly stand the tree in a pail of fresh water. Put the tree and bucket in a room with temperature and humidity similar to those of the room where the tree will be displayed. After 12 hours, measure the amount of water that a tree has consumed. You can do this by comparing water volumes at the beginning and the end of the 12-hour period. Or you can mark the water level at the beginning of the period and then, after 12 hours, measure the amount of water needed to bring the water back up to the original level.

The amount of water consumed in the test can vary considerably, depending on the species and size of the tree and on the temperature and relative humidity of the room. If the tree is 6 or 7 feet high and if room temperature and humidity are average for early December, you might reasonably expect an acceptably fresh tree to take up a pint or more of water during the 12 hours. A dry tree (below 85 percent moisture content) will not absorb water.

The dealer knows or should know the degree of freshness of his trees and if he will not agree to this arrangement then you should look elsewhere for a tree.

## How To Care for Your Tree

A fresh tree remains fresh and fragrant if you take care of it. A neglected tree loses much of its beauty after only a short period. Follow these hints.

**Care of a freshly cut tree.** Cutting your own tree from a private Christmas tree grower's plantation is the most reliable method of insuring a fresh tree. If you are fortunate enough to have this experience available to your family, avoid hauling your tree over long distances if it will be subjected to the wind. Air moving across the needles will cause a rapid evaporation of the water in the tree.

If you purchase your tree from a sales lot, buying the tree as early as possible will insure greater freshness and better selection, and will make it possible to maintain the tree in a safer condition by giving it proper care and attention.

**Storing the tree.** Once you get the tree home, you should make a fresh cut on the trunk of the tree, place it in water, and store it in a cool environment, preferably out of the wind. Your garage will serve as an acceptable storage area. Avoid storing the tree on the ground, as it may become frozen in place and difficult to move without breaking the branches.

**Basal cuts on the trunk.** After a few days the cut that was made on the trunk in harvesting the tree will dry out, become clogged with resin, and will no longer absorb water. To avoid this problem make a fresh cut on the base of the tree as soon as you return home with the tree.

Two common basal cuts are made on Christmas tree trunks — diagonal cuts and right-angle or square cuts.



Diagonal cut

Right-angle cut

In the past, it has been recommended that a diagonal cut should be made on the base of the tree to insure adequate water uptake from the stand. This may not be true.

**Placement of the tree in the home.** Displaying your tree properly in the home can also reduce water losses.

Avoid placing the tree near a fireplace or furnace outlet, as the heat emitted will cause the tree to dry out rapidly.

Reducing the room temperature will also reduce the amount of moisture which evaporates from the tree.

## How Long Will a Tree Last?

No tree can be guaranteed to last for an indefinite period of time. Christmas trees, like merchandise sold in a store, can perform only so long. The length of time the tree will stay fresh depends on many of the factors mentioned previously. However, the species of tree, its genetic variability, and the degree of freshness at purchase will ultimately affect the length of freshness. As a general rule, a freshly cut tree, if cared for properly, can be displayed safely in the home for at least two weeks with little difficulty.

The Illinois Cooperative Extension Service Provides Equal Opportunities in Programs and Employment.

**This publication was prepared by Mike Bolin, Assistant Extension Forester.**

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