

Buying A Living Christmas Tree

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Guide H-421

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Consider buying a living, containerized evergreen tree for your next Christmas season. A living Christmas tree will provide enjoyment long after the holiday season has passed. A containerized Christmas tree continues to grow and can be used repeatedly in the future. Or, it can be planted out-of-doors as an ornamental or for a privacy screen.

SELECTING A TREE

Use care in selecting a potted specimen. Avoid plants showing poor vigor or evidence of mishandling. Discoloration (yellowing or browning) or needle shedding may indicate serious damage that may require years to overcome, or the tree may die.

Choose a species that will thrive in your climate. The climate of a location in southern New Mexico at 3,800 feet is considerably different from the climate of a site near Chama (elevation above 8,000 feet). Conifers that generally grow well in southern New Mexico (below 5,000 feet) include Aleppo pine (*Pinus halepensis*), Calabrian pine (*P. brutia*), Afghan pine (*P. eldarica*)—trade names include ‘Mondell’ and ‘Blue Eldarica’, Canary Island pine (*P. canariensis*), Italian stone pine (*P. pinea*) and pinyon pine (*P. edulis*).

Pine species that can, in general, tolerate climates occurring between 5,500 and 7,500 feet include pinyon pine, southwestern white pine (*P. strobiformis*), Austrian pine (*P. nigra*) and Scotch pine (*P. sylvestris*). Blue spruce (*Picea pungens*), a few other spruce species, Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), white fir (*Abies*

concolor) and bristlecone pine (*P. aristata*) are excellent choices for upper-middle and high elevations (6,500-8,500 feet). These also will do well at lower elevations where shade is available and soils are not highly alkaline.

Your choice also should take into account the number of years you wish to keep the evergreen as a Christmas tree. If it is going to be used that way for several years, it may be better to buy a slow-growing conifer, such as pinyon pine, blue spruce or bristlecone pine, which grow less than 8 inches a year. For comparison, Afghan pine may grow 3 feet its second year from seedling, and Scotch and Austrian pines generally will grow at least 1 foot per year.

Resistance to environmental stresses, such as smog and soil alkalinity, may play a major role in deciding the fate of your tree. Afghan pine appears to be an excellent choice for smog-ridden areas. It also can tolerate alkaline soils.

Also consider water requirements. Aleppo, Afghan, Canary Island and Italian stone pines require less water than spruces, Douglas fir, or white fir.

CARING FOR A TREE

Once the decision has been made, purchase the tree as close as possible to the time that you want it in the house. It is possible for the rootball to freeze if left unprotected. To minimize the risk of injury, put a chicken wire cylinder around the container and fill with enough hay or leaves to cover the rootball. Water trees occasionally to avoid excessive drying.

Place the tree in a large tub and keep the soil moist. Generally, instructions for care and re-planting come with the tree. Follow these instructions closely. Above all, make your purchase from a reputable grower or nursery. This helps ensure that the tree will survive.

When a tree is going to be planted right after the Christmas season, do not keep it in the house longer than 20 days. Warmth, moisture and light could cause it to start growing. If this happens, the chances for the tree's survival outdoors will greatly decrease. For high altitude areas of New Mexico, it is best to dig the hole for the tree before the ground becomes frozen, so that it can be successfully planted immediately when taken from the house.

Trees kept in the containers can be placed outdoors during the frost-free season. When taking the tree outdoors, do it gradually over a two-week period, allowing the tree to adjust for the brighter light outside. For example, move it from the family room to a northside window to a southside window to the carport. This process should be reversed when bringing the tree indoors. Taking the evergreen outdoors or bringing it indoors in a one-step process will affect tree foliage and some leaves will fall.

Handles, built-in casters or a hand truck will enable you to move containers without risk of injury.