

Purchase, Care and Planting of Live Christmas Trees



James T. Fisher, Professor
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Guide H-421

Consider buying a living containerized evergreen tree for your next Christmas season. A living Christmas tree will provide enjoyment long after the Yule season has passed. A living Christmas tree can be planted outdoors in ornamental landscapes, or it often can be donated to civic or charitable organization. Slower growing species can be grown in the container and used for future Christmases.

Selecting a Tree

Use care in selecting a potted specimen. Avoid plants showing poor vigor from mishandling. Evidence of poor vigor might include needles that are stunted, stiff, or discolored. Furthermore, needle discoloration (yellowing or browning) or shedding can indicate serious damage that can require years to overcome, or can kill the tree.

Choose a species that will thrive in your climate. The climate of a location in southern New Mexico at 3,800 feet is vastly different from the climate of a site near Santa Fe, NM (elevation of 7,000 feet). Conifers that generally grow well in southern New Mexico below 5,000 feet include eldarica pine (*P. eldarica*, actually a variety of *P. brutia*), Italian stone pine (*P. pinea*), and pinyon pine (*P. edulis*). Eldarica pine is especially popular in southern New Mexico where it grows rapidly in commercial plantations. Do not confuse eldarica pine with Aleppo pine (*Pinus halepensis*) which is more sensitive to cold.

Some species can be planted throughout New Mexico while species not adapted to severe cold will fail at higher elevations. Pine species that generally tolerate climates occurring between 5,500 and 7,500 feet elevations include pinyon pine, southwestern white pine (*P. strobiformis*), Austrian pine (*P. nigra*) and Scots pine (*P. sylvestris*). Blue spruce (*Picea pungens*), Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), white fir (*Abies concolor*) and bristlecone pine (*P. aristata*) are excellent choices for higher elevations (6,500-8,500 feet).

Your choice of species should also take into account the number of years you wish to use the tree as a Christmas tree. Species such as pinyon and bristlecone pines grow less than 1 foot a year and can

be used several seasons. Scots and Austrian pines grow about 1 foot each year and eldarica pine grows as much as 3 to 4 feet each year.

Above all, purchase your tree from a reputable grower or nursery. This assures that the tree is properly identified to species and was grown from seed adapted to New Mexico.

Tree growth following transplanting will depend on the severity of environmental stress such as drought and soil alkalinity. In landscape plantings, pines require less water than spruces, Douglas-fir or true firs (*Abies* spp). Furthermore, eldarica pine tolerates alkaline soils better than New Mexico's native pines.

Caring for a Tree

Purchase your tree near the beginning of the Christmas season. Trees should be protected from wind while being transported. Store the tree in a protected, cool environment until it is moved inside. Water the tree occasionally to avoid drying. Ice cubes can be added instead of water to avoid wetting the floor and packages. Use low wattage decorative bulbs to avoid foliage damage.

Planting

A tree that will be planted immediately after the Christmas season should not be kept indoors more than 30 days. Warmth, moisture and light could induce shoot growth. If this occurs, freezing temperatures can injure or kill the transplant. A tree taken outdoors should be protected from full sun and wind until planted. It is critically important that the root ball remain intact at all times. Also, you should protect the root ball from freezing by mulching with hay straw, leaves or other suitable material.

For high elevation areas in New Mexico, it is best to dig the hole for the tree before the ground freezes.

Trees kept in the containers can be placed outdoors during the frost-free season.

Generally, instructions for care and replanting come with the tree. Refer to these instructions while taking into account your local conditions.

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

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