



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

CARING FOR A LIVING CHRISTMAS TREE

By Trish Grenfell, Placer County Master Gardener

Q I am considering buying a live Christmas tree so that we can plant it in our yard after the holidays. Any helpful hints?

A Purchasing a living tree and successfully establishing it in the landscape can make holiday memories live on as the tree grows each year. But before you make this decision, be aware and prepared. First of all, they cost more than cut trees. Living trees can stay in the house for only a brief period, no more than 7 to 10 days. The plant's buds must remain dormant in order to avoid winter kill once it is moved outdoors. While the tree is indoors, don't let the soil and root ball dry out. The ball can be placed in a tub and kept moist with straw or peat moss packed around it to retain the moisture. Don't apply flocking or artificial snow to the tree.

Make sure that the tree species you choose will fit into your landscape. Most trees used as Christmas trees will eventually reach heights of 40 to 60 feet, widths of 10 to 15 feet. Select a species that is well-suited to growing in your area. (Be aware that the popular Scotch pine usually succumbs to insects and/or disease and dies in less than 25 years.)

Choose a sunny site with well-drained soil as the permanent landscape location. Living trees are very heavy, 100-200 pounds for a 6 foot tree. They will be even heavier, since it is necessary to keep the roots constantly moist. Be sure that you can manage to move this much weight around without damaging the tree, your home, or yourself. Live trees are normally sold as balled and burlapped, but container-grown trees are usually lighter and easier to handle. A small tree is also lighter and has a better chance of survival outside.

Following the holidays, it is best to provide a gradual transition for the tree from indoors to outdoors. Let the tree spend a few days in a cool area protected from the wind, such as a garage, rather than abruptly planting it outdoors. This is especially desirable if the weather is extremely cold and windy. Conifers are prone to winter injury because they continue to lose water through their needles during the winter. Trees with unestablished root systems are especially vulnerable. After planting, water thoroughly.

If you do choose to go live despite the hardships, I raise a toast to you for adding to the landscape rather than the landfill.

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