



Tips for First-Time Buyers of Real Christmas Trees

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If you have never purchased and set up a real, live Christmas tree, but are considering it because you're thinking "green," you are not alone. Tree growers are seeing more interest in real trees. However, before you buy, you should think about how you are going to set up and care for that tree—and about how you will dispose of it. This short note is designed to help keep the purchase and set-up process an exciting event that will develop memories and traditions to last a lifetime.

Be careful when you choose your tree size. Trees standing in a field, on display in a barn, or standing outside may not appear large because of the open environment—and that can fool you. Once brought inside, what appeared to be a medium-sized tree may occupy considerable space. Large trees are also more difficult to handle and set up. If you have a location in mind, measure the dimensions of the area before measuring and choosing a tree. Don't forget to measure the width of your prospective tree as well as the height. Some trees are more globose at the bottom and, thus, take more room than a tree with a steep taper. For your first real tree, a six- to eight-foot height may be appropriate.

Selection and Purchase

Locally produced, real trees are commonly sold by choose-and-cut farms. Procedures vary greatly from farm to farm, but in general, you'll probably arrive and either walk or ride to the field and select the tree you want. You then cut the tree—or an attendant cuts the tree for you—and the tree is transported back to the central location. For information about different real tree species read *Selecting an Indiana-Grown Christmas Tree*, FNR-422-W.

At many farms, attendants shake the dead needles from the tree. This is especially important for species like Scotch pine. Depending on species and age, the inner needles in conifers naturally die. With short-needled trees, such as firs, most of the needles drop to the ground. However, with long-needled trees, such as Scotch pines, the needles become lodged in the branches and, if not re-



Figure 1. At many farms, attendants shake the dead needles from the tree.

moved, continue to fall out during transportation, set up, and subsequent disposal. Shaking the tree eliminates any messiness at set-up.

Another service offered by some farms is tree baling. This is particularly important for larger trees. The tree is simply pulled through a cone-shaped device that applies netting or twine. By baling, most trees can be condensed to less than two feet in diameter without damaging the



Figure 2. Another service offered by some farms is tree baling.

branches. As a result, these baled trees can be easily placed in a car trunk or tied on top of the car and subsequently moved through a door and into the house. The netting can be left on the tree until after it is placed in a stand. This makes it much easier to set up the tree. (NOTE: If you plan to leave the netting on the tree until after it is set up, be sure to flag the best side of the tree before it gets baled, so you can properly position it in the room.)

You can also buy real trees from lots set up for just a few weeks to accommodate seasonal demand. Many full-time retailers such as hardware stores, grocery stores, and big box stores also sell real Christmas trees. These trees are precut, baled, and shipped to the point of final sale. Since the trees are precut, take care to make sure your tree is fresh, so that after you set it up, it will last for the holiday season.

Recutting

A tree that has been cut for more than six to eight hours needs to have ½ inch or so cut off of the butt end before you place it in a tree stand and water it. When a tree is cut and the cut left exposed to air, the exposed cells become blocked to water uptake. When recut, the tree is then able to take up water (use cool water).

Tree Stands

Tree set-up can be one of the most difficult parts of the entire process due to the large variation in available tree stands. However, choosing the right stand can make the process easy. Stands can be made from metal, plastic, a combination of the two materials, or even concrete. Some have legs that extend out a considerable distance from the butt of the tree and provide stability. Others have shorter legs or no legs at all. Some have large water containers; others have very small containers. So, how do you choose the best stand for your tree? What should you look for?

The main characteristics to look for in a tree stand are:

- stability (to hold the tree upright)
- adequate water capacity (about one quart for each inch of stem diameter)
- ease of set-up (Thumb screws have been used for years, but can be hard to manage when you are on your hands and knees under the tree tightening the thumb screws and keeping the tree straight all at the same time.)

Some choose-and-cut farms offer a stand with a centrally positioned upward-pointing spike. A special boring machine prepares the tree to accept the spike. The tree



Figure 3. Some choose-and-cut farms offer a stand with a centrally positioned upward-pointing spike.

is set up vertically and straight in the boring machine. The butt of the tree is bored. Once you take the tree to its set-up location, you lay it flat, and drive the spike into the previously bored hole. Use a heavy hammer to pound the spike completely into the hole. Then, simply tip the tree up and properly position it. If they mount the tree on its stand at the point of purchase, it will be difficult to transport without loosening the stand.

Some extra heavy-duty stands are designed to accommodate large trees—those much taller than 10 feet. With some of these stands, you clamp the tree in the stand and use a foot pedal and ball system to set the tree straight.

Stands can cost anywhere from a few dollars to a large sum. A moderately priced stand in the \$15 to \$25 range should provide adequate stability for trees less than nine feet tall and is reusable. Many tree farms sell stands and can help you select an appropriately sized stand for your tree.

Tree Care

A fresh-cut, real Christmas tree is generally serviceable from just after Thanksgiving to somewhat after Christmas, if it is truly fresh when set up and then well cared for.

If you buy a tree, but don't plan to set it up for a few days or longer, store it in a cool location out of the wind and sun. Trees dry out rapidly on warm, windy days with direct sunlight on them. Cut ½ inch from the end of the trunk and place the tree in a container of cool water to help it stay fresh. Tree trunks cut for more than six to eight hours and left out in the air are not able to absorb water, because the exposed cells become blocked. If a fresh, ½-long cross cut is made at the butt of the tree, water will again be able to move upwards.

When setting up the tree, keep it away from direct sources of heat such as warm-air floor vents, operating wood stoves, fireplaces, hot lights, etc. Lowering the room temperature extends the service life of the tree. Heat makes a tree dry faster than normal. Use only approved ornamental lights that produce low heat.

After you have selected a stand that can hold an ample supply of water—at least one quart for each inch of stem diameter—be sure to keep filling it. Be sure to use cool water. Additives probably do not add to the tree's life once it is cut. Larger trees obviously require more water (and a larger, heavy-duty stand). A seven-foot tree may easily use two quarts of water a day for the first week. Trees typically take a lot of water the first week or two, then slow down.

If the tree runs out of water, it loses its ability to take up water and starts to dry out. At that point, you must take the tree down and make a fresh cut on the base of the stem. To avoid this, be sure to check and water the tree every day. Also allow extra water for the family dog and cat!

Tree Removal and Disposal

When it is time to take the tree down, you can take steps to facilitate the disposal process.

- Let the water bowl dry out or carefully empty it prior to tree removal. You want to avoid spilling large amounts of water on the floor.
- Buy large plastic bags that you can place over small- to medium-sized trees before they are moved out of their set-up location. This contains the debris and needles.
- Finally, on large trees, cut the tree into smaller parts, then bag and remove the pieces individually.

If you are looking for “green” solutions to disposal, ask locally. Many trees in urban areas are simply left at the curb for pick-up and recycled for mulch. In other cases, you may need to take the tree to a central recycling center where trees are chipped for mulch.

Here are other recycling options to consider. *(However, if your tree has been shipped in, you should probably destroy it before spring to prevent introduction of any unwanted new pests.)*

- Trees can be weighted and sunk in ponds and lakes to provide protection for smaller baitfish such as minnows. Sinking brush is not legal in all waters, so check the laws first.
- If your location warrants it, you might use large quantities of trees for stream bank and shore stabilization.
- You can leave your tree in the backyard to provide habitat for birds and other small animals.

With a little thought and care, your real Christmas tree can bring you joy over the holidays, create lasting memories, and benefit the environment. Happy Holidays!

