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### How to Choose and Plant a Live Christmas Tree

Buying a live Christmas tree has become a popular practice in recent years. In addition to being used indoors as a Christmas tree they eventually are planted outdoors as a part of your landscape. The latter use is what makes the purchase and care of this tree very important. During the spring season the Diagnostic Lab often receives calls concerning the health of these trees. Many people find that with spring thaws and warmer weather, their trees brown quickly and die. By purchasing a healthy tree and caring for it properly, you should be able to insure that your tree becomes a useful part of your landscape.

**How to select a live Christmas Tree.** When you shop for a live Christmas tree insist on healthy, recently dug or container-grown specimens. Be aware of "bargain" trees. These trees may be leftovers from earlier planting seasons and could be in poor shape by the time the Christmas season arrives. Avoid trees with very dry or hard soil (which may indicate they weren't watered properly), brown or off-color needles and trees exhibiting a large amount of needle drop. Branches should be pliable and not snap very easily. Buds for the coming season should be alive. Consider digging your own tree if you can find a nursery selling trees like this. Of course, in this situation, be sure you have instructions on how to dig a tree properly. It may not be as easy as you think.

The standard types of cut Christmas trees are Douglas and balsam fir, pine and spruce. Since the tree you are buying isn't cut, you may have to consider some things about these different types of trees. Fir is excellent as a cut tree, but it isn't in its natural range on Long Island. This is not to say the trees are impossible to grow here, but natural plant ranges are something to consider. Pines make very good Christmas trees. White and Scotch pine are commonly grown here. Blue and White spruce are also good Christmas trees. Norway spruce is used as a cut Christmas tree, but it can be undesirable because it doesn't retain water in its needles well. This may also pose a problem with a live tree, when it is brought indoors.

Besides the "Christmas tree" value, you also have to consider the tree's future location. Don't pick a tree which isn't suitable for the spot it will occupy in your landscape. Consider mature height and width, texture, color, growth rate, etc. A dwarf evergreen may be a good choice when your landscape is small.

**When should you buy a live Christmas tree?** This can be a tricky question since you want a freshly dug tree, but you also have to remember, most tree digging stops once the ground freezes. You may want to visit local nurseries early in December. If you can order a tree to be picked up a few days before Christmas, this can be a good approach. If you have to buy your tree a few weeks before Christmas, correct storage will be essential. Of course with a container-grown plant, these problems probably won't exist.

**How to care for a live Christmas Tree.** As soon as you get the tree home, water it immediately. From this point on, until the tree is planted, it is essential that the soil be kept moist. **DO NOT OVERWATER!** Moist soil does not mean soggy wet. Wrapping the soil ball or container with plastic may help to retain moisture. The tree should be kept in a place where low temperatures can be maintained. This will help keep water loss through the needles to a minimum. A spot outdoors sheltered from direct sun and winds could be ideal. Avoid storage areas that allow daytime temperatures to become too warm.

Since the tree will retain its freshness better in a cool location, don't bring the tree indoors too early. A day or two before Christmas would be ideal. Make sure the soil is moist before bringing the tree indoors and watch this closely while the tree remains indoors. Set the tree up in a cool location. Avoid "hot spots" near appliances, radiators, stoves, etc.

The sooner after Christmas you can move the tree back into a cooler location, the better off the tree will be. Place it in the storage area you used before Christmas, so you can maintain cool temperatures for a week or so. Keep the soil moist during this time. After a week or two the tree can be planted outdoors in its permanent location. If this location is not well protected from winds, sun, etc., consider a temporary, sheltered planting spot until spring. A burlap windbreak around the tree could be helpful. If weather is severe you may need to keep the tree stored in a very cold porch or garage until the weather changes. Avoid spots where daytime temperatures will be too warm.

**Planting the Christmas Tree outside.** In order to plant the tree outdoors, the hole should be dug much earlier before the ground freezes. Be sure the hole is *at least 3 times wider* than the soil root ball. Do not dig the hole too deep. Determining the depth of the hole is addressed in the next two paragraphs. Do not over prepare the backfill with organic matter. If the soil is fertile and well-drained, adding amendments to the backfill soil is not recommended. Place the soil on a tarp, in a basket, etc. Store this in a warm place until you are ready to use it. Staking newly planted trees is not recommended. If you feel staking will be necessary be sure to place the stakes in the ground before the ground freezes. Stakes should be removed in the spring – rigid staking that does not allow some trunk swaying is not recommended.

Do not plant too deep. It is very important that the root flare (the area where the major roots and trunk of the plant meet) be at or slightly above the existing soil line. Usually this is the top surface of the root ball or soil medium (with a container-grown plant). Unfortunately some plants are planted too deep in the nursery or container or have had soil piled up next to the trunk during cultivation in the nursery. In these cases the root flare is often not very obvious. Where this is the case you will need to carefully remove the top surface of the soil or medium until the root flare is exposed. Be sure to remove all burlap, twine and wire baskets before back filling the hole.

Measure the height of the root ball (the distance from the root flare to the bottom of the root ball). This distance is how deep the hole should be dug. The soil at the bottom of the hole should be firm so the plant will not settle. Set the plant into the hole and make any final depth adjustments by removing or adding a small amount of soil beneath the root ball. When planting a bare-root tree set the tree on top of a "inverted cone" fashioned out of soil. The trees roots are then spread and directed towards the sides of the hole. Try to keep the roots positioned at the same depth that they were growing at in their original location. For more details on planting trees and shrubs you can read [How to Plant Trees and Shrubs](#) on the Cornell Cooperative Extension – Suffolk County web site or contact our office directly to order a copy.

Container-grown plants have additional pre-planting requirements. Loosening or cutting of the roots is necessary to stimulate root growth to occur from the cut ends and into the surrounding soil. If this is not done the plant has no immediate incentive to send roots into the surrounding soil. These roots will often grow in a circling or girdling fashion and the plant eventually dies. For more detailed information on planting container-grown plants you can read [Planting and After-Care of Container-Grown Plants](#) on the Cornell Cooperative Extension – Suffolk County web site or contact our office directly to order a copy.

After the ground around the tree freezes, mulch it with two to three inches of good mulch. Leave a space of several inches free of mulch around the trunk. The base of a tree should be exposed to air and not buried with mulch or soil. Do not create a mound of mulch, commonly called “volcano mulch” against the base of the tree. Over time this can cause problems with bark rotting. Keep the tree watered, especially during thaws. With proper care, your live Christmas tree should be a valuable addition to your landscape.

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