

Choosing a real tree is a family affair

By Chris Ramsey, Sullivan County UT Extension Agent

Searching for that “just right” Christmas tree can be a great family trip. Whether you go just down the road or on a real “road trip”, take the family shopping for a tree this year. I have many childhood memories and memories with my own children of hunting for a tree. It’s always a real challenge to get everybody to agree, but in the end the process brings the family together.

There are some decisions the family has to make together. Trees come in a variety of options such as pre-cut, choose-and-cut, and live. There are advantages and disadvantages with each of these. If you are considering a tree that can be planted after the holidays, locally grown trees are more likely to survive in our area. Dr. David Merker, UT Extension Forestry Specialist, recommends the Eastern White Pine and the Norway Spruce for the East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia area. Many people like the Fraser Fir, but this tree will rarely survive for long-term at elevations less than 3000 feet.

If you are interested in a cut tree, there are some choose-and-cut tree farms in the area. A trip to one of these farms makes a great family outing. By cutting the tree yourself, you know it is as fresh as possible. You will also find pre-cut trees at the tree farm. Pre-cut trees are also sold by several community organizations around the area each year. Some families enjoy cutting an Eastern Red Cedar from the local area. The cedar, when fully decorated, looks nice and adds a fresh cedar smell to your home.

During my childhood years, we would go to the local tree lot which was run by the local ruritan or optimist club. I can still remember the smell of the trees, the lights, and the unbelievable number of trees to choose from at the lot. Of course, it was usually cold. They often had an old stove or just a fire burning for warmth. Real trees also support local tree growers and the experience of a real tree can create special family memories.

When our children were young and money was short, I can even remember going to a nearby field and cutting a cedar. Like my family says, they weren’t nearly as pretty as a Fraser Fir, but there was something special about cutting a cedar in the field and bringing it home.

We have even gone to a Christmas tree farm before. This trip was usually an all-day affair. We enjoyed walking through the field and cutting down our own tree. Seeing the tree growing in the field and then cutting the tree did add something special to the hunt.

After you determine what kind of tree you want, Larry Tankersley, UT Extension Forestry Specialist, says that size is the most important consideration in selecting your tree. Remember to cut off several inches from the butt end of the tree to make sure that the cut is fresh and ready to take up water. You will regain part of this height when you place the tree in the stand.

Tankersley says trees should have a good green color, strong fragrance and the needles should be flexible. If the needles break when bent between your fingers, then consider another tree.

Then, the decorating part was always interesting. Seems like each year, the numbers of boxes of decorations would grow. We have even had more than one tree. Stringing the lights, placing the ornaments, and oh my tinsel all came together in a magical way. We

were sure to find tinsel somewhere in the house for several months. It's about like finding sand in your car several months after returning from the beach –LOL!

I remember always thinking that even one of the ugliest trees could be beautiful once all the decorations, lights, and angel were on the tree with the presents underneath. An area without good branching was always a good place to hang a larger ornament.

With the tree decorated, we were always enjoyed the tree because we always contributed to the effort. From mounting the stand to topping with the tree with an angel, it was a special family-building process. There were always trimmings from the tree to decorate the mantle over the fireplace and to make wreaths. Live trees also brought the responsibility of watering the tree. This offered an opportunity to build responsibility with our children. They will need to keep the tree submerged in water throughout the holidays. There is no need to add anything to the water for freshness. Tankersley says that misting the tree with water will help to keep it fresh. This will help to limit the amount of moisture lost from the tree.

Finally, make sure you place the tree away from heat ducts and other heat sources. Trees should be removed promptly after Christmas, especially if the tree's needles are dry and falling from the tree.

So, I encourage you to take the family Christmas tree shopping. I know you'll bring home more than a tree. You and your children will have memories to share with each passing year.

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

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