ORNAMENTALS

O Christmas Tree

*O Christmas Tree, O Christmas tree,
How lovely are your branches!*

Are you in the mood for Christmas yet? I certainly am!

Live Christmas trees are wonderful for creating celebratory ambiance. Who doesn’t love the smell of fresh greenery during the holidays? I know you have a choice between an artificial tree and a real one each year and they each have their pros and cons depending on the needs of your household. But if you are in the market for a real tree this year, here are a few tips to get the most out of the experience.

First, picking out the perfect tree can be a great experience for families. If you’d like to pick out a locally grown tree, you can search for a farm at [www.pickyourownchristmastree.org](http://www.pickyourownchristmastree.org), [www.christmastreemap.com](http://www.christmastreemap.com) or, in Kansas, the Kansas Christmas Tree Growers Association ([www.kctga.com](http://www.kctga.com)). These growers produce a variety of trees and may have some species (that might not grow well in the area) shipped from another part of the country (still grown in the USA!). The states with the largest export of Christmas trees are Oregon, North Carolina and Michigan. The most popular species for Christmas trees are pine, fir and spruce.
Each have varying degrees of needle retention, fragrance and branch stiffness (for holding up ornaments, of course).

When you go to pick out your tree, you can cut it yourself (saws provided) or the Christmas tree farmers will cut it for you. Most operations will then shake out the tree’s old needles (this is normal), wrap, load and tie it to your vehicle. While you’re there, how about scheduling a session with a local photographer while you pick out your tree? What a great opportunity to have some family photos taken while supporting at least two small businesses.

Christmas tree farm operators enjoy setting the stage for a pleasant and fun experience. Many also provide hot chocolate, cider, bonfires and candy canes. You will likely be able to purchase a wreath or garland for your front door as well.

Of course, there are always pre-cut Christmas trees available at various stores around your town and they are generally great choices, too (they’ve just been shipped from a longer distance). Take a good look at all of them and see which ones will fit the space in your home and match your style of tree decorating.

Second, after you’ve gotten your tree home, you will want to prepare the spot in your house with a tree stand and plenty of space to move the tree indoors. Before you bring it indoors, cut the bottom inch of the trunk off so that the tree can easily take up water. When the tree is originally cut at the farm, it begins to send sap down to close off the cells so that the canopy of the tree can be protected from water loss. It needs to be cut again to open up the cells that transfer water into the tree so that it won’t dry up during the few weeks it is in your home (no fire hazards, please!). Make sure to replenish the water in the tree stand regularly since they will transpire up to a gallon of water per day. Yay for indoor tree air purifiers during the holidays!

Whether you choose a locally grown tree, purchase a live pre-cut tree locally, or enjoy your allergy-free artificial tree in your home this year, we hope it makes your Christmas very special.

One more thing—here’s an outdoor Christmas decoration idea I found on Pinterest recently—tomato cage Christmas trees. Seriously—search for it. Turn the cage upside down and wrap it with lights. Who knew tomato cages had multiple purposes: supporting tomato plants in the summer and Christmas trees in the winter! Have fun this year! (CRB)

**MISCELLANEOUS**

**Poor Drainage in Garden Areas**

Winter is often a good time to fix areas in the garden where water sits and does not drain properly. Such areas often harm plant roots due to poor oxygen levels in the soil. Consider adding good topsoil so water doesn’t sit. Be sure to till or spade the area to mix the new topsoil and the underlying existing soil. Plant roots do not like to cross distinct barriers caused by one type of soil sitting on top of another.
Internal drainage can be improved by adding organic matter such as peat moss, rotted hay, rotted silage or compost. This can be done by adding a 2- to 4-inch layer of organic matter to the surface of the soil and tilling or spading in as deeply as possible. (WU)

**Ashes in the Garden**

You may have heard that using wood ashes on your garden can help make the soil more fertile. Though ashes do contain significant amounts of potash, they contain little phosphate and no nitrogen. Most Kansas soils are naturally high in potash and do not need more. Also, wood ashes will raise the pH of our soils, often a drawback in Kansas where soils tend toward high pH anyway. Therefore, wood ashes add little benefit, and may harm, many Kansas soils. In most cases it is best to get rid of them. (WU)

**Compost Pile Maintenance**

Compost piles should be turned about once per month even during the winter months. This will insure the composting process continues and that all materials are equally composted. A compost pile is “turned” when uncomposted material is moved from the sides and tops of the pile to the center where it provides “fuel” for the microorganisms that break it down. Water may need to be added if the material you move to the center is dry. Check the moisture content by squeezing a fistful in your hand. It should feel moist but no excess water should drip out. Compress the material as best you can as excess air can slow the composting process. (WU)

**Storing Power Equipment for the Winter**

Late fall or early winter is a good time to service power equipment such as mowers, tillers and garden tractors. Run the equipment out of gas or treat the existing gas with a stabilizer as untreated gas can deteriorate over time. If using a stabilizer, run the engine long enough for untreated gas in the carburetor bowl to be burned and replaced. This is also a good time to replace the oil (and filter, if present) since the engine is warm. Check and replace the spark plug if necessary. Some gardeners will also apply a light, sprayable oil into the cylinder through the spark plug hole. Check and clean air filters and replace if necessary. Many mowers and tillers will have a foam prefilter that can become filthy with use. If allowed to become too dirty, engines will run poorly or may not run at all. Sharpen blades, clean tines,
tighten screws, replace broken parts and do all the other things needed to keep equipment in good shape. Though such maintenance takes some time and effort, it pays for itself by reducing frustration and lost time due to poorly performing equipment during a hectic spring. (WU)

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