

# Selection and Care of the Christmas Tree

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



PHOTO BY **William M. Johnson**

Choosing a real Christmas tree is a fun outing for the whole family and easy to do. A simple freshness test should be conducted before buying your tree. Gently grasp a branch with needles between your thumb and forefinger and pull it toward you. Few needles should come off in your hand if the tree is fresh.

The time is at hand to deck the halls for the Holiday Season. Christmas is fast approaching. Do you have the mistletoe, holly, and yule tree ready yet?

Few of us have direct access to a local source of fresh sprigs of mistletoe to hang over doorways since mistletoe is fairly rare in Galveston County. (This is actually very good — for our trees anyway — because American species of mistletoe are parasitic plants as opposed to

the European mistletoe celebrated in Christmas traditions.) Some of us can make fresh boughs of holly to deck the halls since hollies are common in our area and hollies have set a good berry crop this year. However, for many folks — both the young and not-so-young — a fresh Christmas tree complete with lights and other decorations provides a delightful focal point to assemble and open those holiday

gifts. Fortunately, the Christmas tree is accessible through a wide variety of outlets. Christmas trees are now a renewable resource. After a tree is harvested on a tree growing farm, it is replaced with a transplant seedling and the cycle is repeated. Christmas tree production is an emerging industry in Texas. How will you select, prepare, and care for your Christmas tree? Even if you



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put off buying the yule tree until the last minute, there are several steps you should take to ensure adequate safety and full enjoyment of the occasion. The lasting beauty of a Christmas tree depends on careful selection and proper pre-holiday treatment. The following are suggested guidelines:

**Selecting the Tree:** Choosing a real Christmas tree is a fun outing for the whole family and easy to do. Here are a few helpful hints, so your tree isn't bare by Christmas Eve: First, select a tree with fresh, green color. Such trees provide good needle retention, pleasing fragrance, better fire resistance, and longer holiday beauty. Second, conduct a simple freshness test. Gently grasp a branch between your thumb and forefinger and pull it toward you. Few needles should come off in your hand if the tree is fresh. Third, try lifting the tree a few inches off the ground and letting it drop on the stump end. Very few green needles should fall off. (NOTE: This action will require a measure of gravitas so be prepared for folks looking in your direction.)

**Preparing the Tree:** Once the tree is selected, properly pre-condition it before setting it up inside the home. Imagine that your tree has been cut a while back, packed into trucks, and shipped to its final destination. During this period of transport, the tree's water uptake mechanism at the point of the cut becomes blocked with dirt, sawdust, and resins from the tree.

To help alleviate water uptake problems, purchase your tree a little in advance of the time before it is to be set up and decorated.

When you get your tree home, cut off the butt of the tree trunk at least one inch above the original cut. Place the trunk in a container of water in a cool location out of doors overnight or even for a couple of days, if possible. This helps the tree to absorb water which will extend the season of freshness and reduce the fire hazard associated with dry trees.

**Caring for the Tree:** When it's time to trim the tree, place it in a tree stand that holds water, and keep it filled throughout its use over the holiday season. Check the water level periodically and refill as needed.

A cut Christmas tree will absorb a surprising amount of water, especially during the first few days. During the first week, check the level of water in the stand a couple of times a day and refill as needed. Then check the stand daily. Make sure the water level never drops below the bottom of the trunk. The tree will take up a larger quantity of water at first, as much as a gallon or more a day, but water uptake will slack off later. The amount of water initially taken up primarily depends on how recently the tree was harvested. After the tree is placed in a container of water, never allow the water level in the container to drop below the freshly cut end of the trunk.

**Additional Safety Hints.** Place the tree in the coolest location possible indoors, away from fireplaces or heater vents. Inspect Christmas tree lights before placing them on the tree. Look for worn, exposed, or frayed wires and broken or cracked bulbs and replace as necessary. Be sure to not overload exten-

sion cords and to check to see that your smoke detectors are working properly.

We think of the holidays as happy times, an occasion for celebration, thankfulness, and sharing with our family, friends and community. By taking a few preventive measures, you and your family can celebrate a happy, nostalgic, and fire-safe holiday.

At a Glance

WHAT: Growing Tomatoes from Seed

DATE: Saturday, Dec. 12

TIME: 9:00 - 11:30 a.m.

SPEAKER: Master Gardener Ira Gervais

TOPICS: Variety selection including heirlooms, where to obtain seeds, planting and growing techniques, and insect and disease control

WHERE: Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office in Carbide Park (4102-B Main St., La Marque). Visit <http://aggie->

[horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston/index.html](http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston/index.html) for additional details.

No fee but pre-registration is required (phone 281-534-3413, ext. 21; e-mail [GALV3@wt.net](mailto:GALV3@wt.net)).

