

## Christmas Tree Selection and Care

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**F**or more than 150 years, many Americans have enjoyed the tradition of a fresh, fragrant evergreen tree as part of their Christmas celebrations. Today 30–35 million real trees are sold each holiday season, and there have never been more sources from which to select.

As the holiday season approaches each year, many consumers ask the same question. Real, or artificial? Although there are pros and cons to both sides of this argument, one need not feel guilty for environmental reasons about buying a real Christmas tree. Unlike their artificial counterparts, real trees are biodegradable, and they're a renewable resource, planted and grown on farms. As they grow, they shelter birds and other wildlife and prevent soil erosion. After harvest the land is usually replanted with young seedling trees to begin a new crop. While they're growing, real Christmas trees absorb carbon dioxide and other gases while emitting oxygen. The National Christmas Tree Association estimates that every acre of Christmas trees grown produces the daily oxygen requirement for 18 people.

### Mail-order trees

In the last few years tree growers have begun offering mail-order service, through which trees of a certain species and size can be ordered, packed fresh in a special box and shipped directly to the consumer. Although mail-order trees are probably more expensive than trees purchased locally, this method of purchase generally ensures freshness while offering the ultimate degree of consumer convenience. An estimated 175,000 trees are shipped to fill orders placed via e-commerce or catalogue. The National Christmas Tree Association maintains a Web site with a list of more than 50 retail sources of mail-order trees. (Log on at [www.christmastree.org](http://www.christmastree.org).)

### Choose-and-cut tree farms

The best way to ensure a fresh Christmas tree is to cut it yourself. Christmas trees have been grown commercially in Texas since 1977, and several tree farms are located in or near Harris County.

The two types of trees most often available at tree farms in our area are the Virginia pine and Leyland cypress. The most popular is the Virginia pine, a short-needled pine with pleasant pine fragrance and dense foliage. The Leyland Cypress is a more recent Christmas tree variety, favored by some consumers because it will outlast any other tree without shedding its needles if kept in water. However, the Leyland has a lacier appearance and its branches will not hold big, heavy ornaments as well as the Virginia pine.



To find out where choose-and-cut farms are located, watch for newspaper ads at the beginning of the holiday season, usually around Thanksgiving. The Texas Christmas Tree Growers Association maintains a list of Christmas tree farms throughout the state, including several in the Houston area. (Log on at [www.texaschristmastrees.com](http://www.texaschristmastrees.com).)

### **Tree lots, nurseries, garden centers**

Most Christmas trees are still purchased locally, at retail lots set up at shopping centers, discount stores, supermarkets, and other visible locations. Tree lots and local nurseries provide convenience to consumers who have limited time for tree shopping and usually offer a wide variety of tree species from which to choose.

When choosing a tree from a retail lot, the first concern should be the freshness of the tree because the length of time since cutting can greatly affect how well it will hold its needles and fragrance. In general, a fresh tree will have a healthy, green appearance without a large number of dead or browning needles. Break a few needles; they should be flexible and feel slightly moist. Needles should not come off in your hand if you gently stroke a branch. A useful trick is to bump the trunk on the ground. It's normal for some needles to fall but if they're still dropping heavily after two or three bumps, the tree is too dry.

After arriving home, remove one or two inches from the base of the trunk to encourage better water absorption. Place the trunk in a bucket of water for a day or two and keep the tree in a cool, shaded area before bringing it indoors. Depending on size and other factors, a tree may absorb as much as a gallon of water the first day.

When setting up your tree, locate it away from any heat source that can accelerate drying. Christmas trees can absorb a lot of water, so place the tree in a stand with a generous capacity, at least one quart or larger. Check the water level each day and add water as needed. Small lights, which give off little heat, can help preserve freshness.

### **Tree recycling**

Since real Christmas trees are biodegradable, after the holidays they can be converted into landscaping mulch or put to other organic uses. Each year the City of Houston offers a Christmas tree recycling service, which converts the trees into mulch that is later used in City landscaping projects. If you have enough space, before converting your tree to mulch for your own garden, consider turning it into a bird feeder by placing it in the backyard and attaching bread or suet to the branches.



Gardening fact sheets are distributed by Harris County Master Gardeners, community volunteers trained in basic horticulture by Texas Cooperative Extension. For information about Master Gardener volunteer training classes, call Harris County Cooperative Extension at 281.855.5600, or send an e-mail to [harris@ag.tamu.edu](mailto:harris@ag.tamu.edu).