



Selecting a Holiday Tree

by The Garden Hoe, Lis Friemoth

It is the hunting season and for some it involves an exhaustive search for the right spot, for the quarry that embodies perfection in all aspects, watching the weather channel to best gauge conditions – yeah, we will go to any length to bag the right holiday tree. In today's culture, there are a myriad of reasons for using evergreens as holiday decoration. Let's not be judgmental, no one has the patent on why to put a tree up - the original use was in celebrations of winter solstice. No matter what the reasoning for getting a lovely evergreen - let's look at some of the characteristics of trees generally available for purchase and a few handy tips for care.

Before you even think about heading out to get the tree, be sure to measure the space intended for tree placement. And make sure you get horizontal measurements as well as vertical. According to the tree industry, the standards for shearing generally result in a taper of 80%. How does that translate? A ten foot tall tree will have a base width of eight feet. Take your tape measure with – they always look smaller outside and why pay for the extra three feet you are going to cut off when it doesn't fit? The trees species listed below are just a handful of the evergreens available. By no means should this limit you when choosing that special tree for whatever event you are celebrating. And don't be afraid to buy a real tree – you will not be encouraging denuding of naturally forested areas by choosing a freshly cut tree. Almost 100% of the tree industry practices sustainable cropping. Growers continually try new cultivars to improve our tree hunting experience so with all of them working to make us happy, keep your eyes peeled for those unusual gems just waiting to follow you home. *Abies balsamea* or balsam fir is a popular tree choice with lovely dark green, long lasting needles that smell fantastic. *Abies concolor* or white fir have naturally medium green foliage with a nice well shape and good fragrance, as an added bonus, they hold their needles pretty well after harvest. *Abies fraseri* (Fraser fir) somewhat aromatic foliage tends more toward a bluish green color that holds very well after harvest - making it another popular short needled choice. *Picea abies*, Norway spruce, do best when fresh cut and vigorously watered as the needles, although nice looking, don't have a long retention period. *Pseudotsuga menziesii* or Douglas fir has nicely scented, dark green to bluish colored soft needles that encircle the branches – it's one of the most purchased trees for the holiday seasons. *Pinus strobus* L. (white pine) has very good retention of its lovely soft needles, and although not highly scented,

it is a favorite among long-needle tree fans. With the naturally open habit, they tend to be a popular tree for shearing as this encourages a denser branching structure. *Pinus sylvestris* L., or Scotch pine, has darker green and very long lasting needles which do very well from harvest through season's end. White spruce or *Picea glauca* with its good natural form and nice needle retention (even though the needles do tend to be a bit on the stiff side) makes a good choice for those that prefer an un-sheared tree.

Keeping those trees happy and green is not as difficult as we make it. Whether you cut your own or buy from a pre-cut lot, a few quick checks will result in a longer lasting tree. First - use some common sense when looking at the trees. When fresh, the needles should hold on the tree nicely when you gently grasp and run your hand across the branches. *Pinus* species needles will bend when fresh, break when dry. In contrast, on most of the short needled trees, fresh needles will snap sharply when bent (I said needles – don't snap the branches!). The tree should have a pleasant overall fragrance, plenty of healthy needles, and appropriate coloring for the species. It is natural, and should be no cause for worry, to see a bit of needle loss and browning on the trees. If it needle health seems questionable, keep looking. All trunks should be relatively straight – allowing, of course, for natural trunk shape which varies a bit from species to species. Have the tree lot or farm to net your chosen tree if the service is available. It certainly minimizes transportation damage. When you get it home, don't bother with the fancy angle cuts, drilled holes, or any of the other “tricks” for prolonging the freshness of the tree. The best method is to cut off at least ½” from the base - so that it sits flat in the stand. Be careful to leave bark (the water conducting tissue) intact, and handle with a bit of care so as not to bruise the open tissue as that will adversely affect water uptake. That cut base should get into the tree stand and water (no – the water temperature doesn't matter) within a few hours. But don't worry, if you run into problems when putting the tree into the stand – most can uptake water for about six hours after cutting. Using low wattage lights, keeping the tree away from heat sources and out of direct sunlight will all help to prolong holiday tree enjoyment.