



True gardeners think about plants - and hardscapes and soil amendments and sharpening the tools and, and, and – all year long. Why not add another item to the gardening list? Include a live tree for the season. Although Christmas tree farms produce renewable crops, and many artificial trees are now recyclable, the idea of using a live tree to celebrate can warm the freezing garden soul. With a bit of planning and care, you can enjoy a new tree or plant for the holiday season, and after the festivities have come and gone, for a long grow in the home or landscape.

One of the most important planning steps in choosing an indoor live tree or plant is to decide on the ultimate end use. If you only want a living tree or plant for the duration of the season and have no intention of planting it outside – there is no need to be overly concerned about what species and cultivar you are choosing. Buy something that makes you happy and plan on a trip to the compost pile after it has died.

But – if you are looking to use that live plant either indoors or for the outdoor landscape, you will want to get the most out of that choice. Think homework and anticipate a bit of research before purchasing. Look for species, at the retail centers, that survive in colder climates or in appropriate indoor site conditions. (Don't choose something that needs full sun if you only have a densely shaded site.) The usual outdoor site questions should be asked with an additional view toward the conditions that it will tolerate for the indoor stay. Don't forget to check out the unusual – evergreen fruit trees. Satsuma tangerines, Meyer lemons, and lime trees all make great houseplants that can be moved outside in early summer.

For those live tree purchases, there are a few things to consider: choose a species that is hardy for the climate; ball and burlap or container plants will work best; dig the planting hole (reserving the soil in the garage or shed) before the ground freezes solid; allow enough space for the plant to spread nicely as it matures; and water it in well when planted outside.

Always of concern is how to handle the tree in and out-of-doors so that it sustains the least amount of damaging stress. First of all – once purchased, keep the tree outside

as long as possible. A few days prior to your holiday celebration, move the tree into an unheated garage to acclimate it slightly before taking it into the house. This only needs to be done over a couple of days as the tree should not be in a home environment for more than five to ten days, total. Don't forget to maintain adequate moisture in the container at all times.

Evergreens will continue to transpire moisture through the needles throughout the winter months, so soil moisture levels are extremely important. Handle the tree carefully when moving it about. Most will be heavy, so take extra precautions when lifting. That little extra effort in careful handling will reduce the potential for extreme damage to the branches and trunk – a bit of care and forethought will make it easier for the tree to recover during the next growing season.

Let's take a look at some of the trees that you might find.

*Abies concolor* (Concolor fir); is a pretty tree with great bluish-green colored needles. As a mature specimen, it can be quite impressive, up to about 75' (some claim 100') in height, and about 30' wide. This evergreen is one of the few that actually grows well in partial shade; as long as it is sited in a lower pH soil with well-drained siting. Once established, it is fairly tolerant of drought. As an interior holiday choice – this one does have some nice positive points – one of the best being that it transplants easily. Spider mites can be a problem if left indoors too long and you will need to monitor water provision (not too wet and not too dry) to minimize root rot potential.

*Araucaria heterophylla* (Norfolk island pine) – despite the common name, this plant is not a Pinus, and does not tolerate our cold conditions as it originates from the tropical South Pacific – Norfolk Island to be specific. This species does well between 45 - 75 degrees F; with a high tolerance for heat. Cold damage is likely to happen as soon as temperatures go below 25 degrees F. Salt tolerance is high making the use of softened water generally okay for extended periods of time. Indoor problems enter with low humidity rates and this tropical requires about 50 % humidity to do its best (most homes are at about 18%). In order to promote the best growth, provide at least two

hour of direct sunlight per day, rotating the plant a quarter turn each day for even light exposure. If light levels are insufficient, the plant will become leggy and start to yellow. For any plant living indoors, providing appropriate nutrition during the growing season will help it to thrive. During the semi-dormancy of the winter months, no fertilizer is needed. Soil should be moist but not waterlogged. If allowed to dehydrate, repeatedly, expect to see the lower branches die. If over-watered regularly, branches will yellow and then die. And no, they will not grow back. Spider mites will be a problem indoors. Needle Anthracnose can develop from watering over the foliage – water at the base only. Root rot can develop when moisture provision is uneven – be sure to plant in a sterilized potting medium and do not allow standing water at the base of containers. It is not necessary to prune Norfolk Island pines (except for removing dead branches) as they develop symmetrically.

*Buxus microphylla koreana* or *Buxus microphylla koreana* x *Buxus sempervirens* “Green Series” (Boxwood) make a great indoor holiday plant choice. Mature height and width will vary according to cultivar (look carefully before purchasing). They tolerate shade well, especially in conjunction with drier soils, and require a moderate pH (5.5 – 7.5). When planning for an outside site – they will grow well in soils that are moist and well-drained soils provided full sun is available.

*Chamaecyparis obtusa* or *Chamaecyparis pisifera* (false cypress) mature height is about 60' with a width of 25' – again, choose your cultivar carefully as there are many smaller choices available. In an outdoor setting, they prefer moist, well-drained soils but will tolerate a bit of intense moisture if all other growing conditions are optimal. Full sun to partial shade will make these lovelies happy. When containerized – do not allow to have wet feet. Standing water will promote root rot while containerized. The needles are beautifully soft and lightly fragrant – color varies with cultivar. These are moderate to slow growing, and worth the wait.

*Citrus* (of any kind) do not survive even the most mild of our winters. They must have high humidity, plenty of glorious light (6 – 8 hours per day), moist but very well-drained soil, moderate fertility, and constant monitoring for pests. Expect scale, whitefly, aphids, mealybug, and spider mites. Catching them early is crucial to good control. Also, expect some leaf pathogens to invade, some soil issue

will probably creep up on you, and expect the fruit to look far from perfect. Yes – there are a lot of issue to growing tropical food crops in our neck of the woods. Certainly, they are a lot of work but there is nothing like the scent of citrus blossoms in late winter. And really – what can gardening coup can compare with that of providing fresh limes and tangerines to our gardening friends?

*Picea glauca* ‘Conica’ (Dwarf alberta spruce); max out at 4' – 6'. These are fun-sized trees with rather scratchy needles. They prefer full sun and moist soils with a lower pH range (3.7 – 6.5). As holiday trees, they do very well as they transplant easily. Watch for spider mites as indoor conditions are perfect for rapid development.

*Rosmarinus officinalis* (Rosemary) – are deliciously fragranced for indoor enjoyment, but unfortunately, not hardy outdoors in areas with temps below 0 degrees F. In our area of the world, they are most often planted outdoors with the intention of season to season replacement or to be brought in for over-wintering. They are very tolerant of high pH levels, and are somewhat drought tolerant if adequate air humidity is provided. Rosemary needs full sun indoors to thrive and although they are not particularly pest prone - aphids, whiteflies, spider mites, scale, and mealy bugs can attack if weakened by poor growing conditions. All of these can be easily controlled with a bit soapy water or insecticidal soap when infestations are spotted early. Fertilize once every 6 weeks until late February (be sure to choose a fertilizer that can be used on edibles if you intend to use this herb plant for cooking). Water infrequently but deeply – be sure to drain all water from the container base as they abhor wet feet.