



By Mallory Kelley
Regional Extension Agent
Home Grounds, Gardens, Home Pests



SELECTING A LOCALLY GROWN CHRISTMAS TREE

Can you believe Thanksgiving is over and Christmas is right around the corner. It's time to shop not only for gifts, but for a Christmas tree. Here are some helpful tips and things to consider when purchasing a Christmas tree.

You often hear "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" and that not only goes for fruits and vegetables, but also Christmas trees. There are many advantages to buying an Alabama-grown Christmas tree instead of an artificial tree or a live tree grown in another state. Alabama has between 50 and 60 Christmas tree growers representing a \$3 million industry which helps the economy of Alabama, but there are also many other benefits to buying a local Christmas tree.

Buying a locally grown Christmas tree guarantees its freshness. From the standpoint of freshness, Alabama-grown trees have a distinct advantage as they are chosen and cut from the farm nearby. In contrast, many of the trees you purchase at grocery stores or other retail outlets --- typically firs, spruces and scotch pines were grown in other states and were likely cut weeks before and already may be turning dry.

With an Alabama farm-grown tree, you're also buying a unique experience. Choosing and cutting a tree from an Alabama farm guarantees you and your family the freshest trees that will last much longer and a Christmas memory that you will cherish for a lifetime.

So if you are heading out to a Christmas tree farm in Alabama, what type of trees will you find and what should you be looking for?

The most popular Alabama-grown tree is the Leyland cypress tree (widely known as the Southern Christmas tree), the Arizona cypress which is typically available in two varieties, 'Blue Ice' and 'Carolina Sapphire' and the Virginia pines.

The Leyland cypress has a natural color and, unlike many northern-grown varieties, it doesn't shed after cutting. In fact, as long as it receives an adequate amount of water, Leyland cypress trees can last from Thanksgiving well past New Year's.

A few people still prefer the red cedar, though one disadvantage is that they are extremely sticky compared with other varieties. Still, it remains the preferred tree among a small number of Alabamians who remember this very fragrant tree from childhood.

Leyland and Arizona cypress trees are considered especially safe for the home and are far less prone to drying than northern-grown trees such as firs and spruce. Fir and spruce trees are characterized by heavy sap which tends to clog after the tree is cut and prevents the uptake of water causing the tree to dry out much fast resulting in needle shed.

If you prefer not to cut down a tree only for a few weeks of decorations there are other alternatives. Christmas trees that either have been bagged in burlap or planted in a container have become a popular alternative for environmentally conscious consumers. It's best to keep these trees away from heaters or warm areas in the home. Otherwise, the tree will have a harder time adapting to the colder conditions outside after planting. Also, avoid buying live firs and spruce trees as neither of these are adapted to Alabama's warmer climate.

The Leyland and Arizona cypress make excellent additions to the landscape and are well-suited as screening plants. However, they grow to be very large trees, as high as 50 feet and should be planted at least 12 feet apart. For this reason, many homeowners would not find it practical to plant a live tree every year after Christmas.

Finally, if you do decide to go to the farm and cut that locally grown Christmas tree make sure you recycle it. Many communities throughout Alabama have established Christmas tree recycling programs. You should call your city hall for more details.

Source: Dr. Ken Tilt, Professor of Horticulture, Auburn University

