



Wendy G. Ulrich
Lab Technician, C. Beaty Hannah Horticulture & Environmental Center
News Release

Selecting a Real Christmas Tree

Question: For many years we've had an artificial tree for the Christmas holiday. This year for the first time in many years we will all be together at Thanksgiving (kids will be home from college and military service) and we thought we would take advantage of the time together and put up a real tree. We haven't purchased a real tree in so long we wanted to make sure we knew what to look for and which tree type would last the longest since we are starting so early. Would you help with some much needed information?

Answer: What a wonderful chance to make some special memories! Let's see if we can get you started in the right direction. There are a few factors to consider when selecting a 'pre-cut' tree. One thing to remember is the fresher the tree when purchased the longer it will last if the tree is cared for correctly in the home. Here are a few tips for tree selection at either a "choose and cut" tree farm or a "pre-cut" tree lot.



1. Know the size tree you need and take a measuring tape with you.
 - a. Measure ceiling height.
 - b. Minus the height of the tree topper.
 - c. Minus the height of the tree stand. (a-c equals tree height maximum)
 - d. Measure area where tree will stand (*with many species tree width equals 80% of tree height*).
2. Know what species you want and where to find it; this will take a little research.
3. Conduct your own freshness test at the lot or farm.
 - a. Enclose your hand around a branch near the inside of the tree and run your hand out the length of the branch. The needles should not come off easily or feel brittle.
 - b. Gently bend one of the outer branches, the branch should bend easily and not snap off.
 - c. Watch out for discolored foliage or a musty odor.
 - d. Check for excessive needle loss at the base of trees.
4. Think about the weight and size of your decoration materials (*will the branches support them and will the tree density let you display the decorations as you wish*).

The species will depend on your tree preference and what's available in your area: Christmas tree farms, pre-cut lots, nurseries or home improvement stores. Once you know which choices you like then you can call around and see what's available. Many Christmas tree farms not only have choose and cut trees available but some also purchase pre-cut trees to retail, some farms even have other activities going on during the season. Let's look at some of the characteristics of common trees usually available in the Birmingham area.

1. **Arizona Cypress** (*Cupressus arizonica*)—Pyramid shaped tree with pale-green to gray foliage color, dense tree with tiny but plentiful leaves of about 1/10 inch long. Pleasing aroma.
2. **Eastern Redcedar** (*Juniperus virginiana*)—Not a true cedar but of the juniper family. Forms a pyramidal shape of compact branches, leaves are dark green with reddish colored bark on trunk and branches. Pleasant seasonal aroma.
3. **Fraser Fir** (*Abies fraseri*)—Similar to the balsam fir, the Fraser fir is pyramid shape of strong branches turned upward with dark green flattened ½ inch long leaves. Pleasing strong, woody aroma many times used in fragrant pillows.
4. **Leyland Cypress** (*x Cuprissocyparis leylandii*)—Hybrid cross of Monterey cypress and Alaskan cedar, not naturally occurring must be propagated. Pyramid shaped with foliage of dark green to gray color. Branches are more like flat planes of multi branched shoots. Limber branches of leaves have little to no aroma.
5. **Noble Fir** (*Abies procera*) –Strong branched pyramid shaped tree with bluish-green color foliage. The leaves are about an inch long, have four sides with a silvery appearance from underneath. One of the most popular choices, because of its beauty, strong stiff branches and long keepability. Also a great choice for wreaths and swags. Very pleasant aroma.
6. **Virginia Pine** (*Pinus virginiana*)—This tree is easy to identify because of its twisted needles averaging 1 ½ to 3 inches in length. This tree is normally sheered to a pyramid shape during its growth stage and the branches are strong and woody. Dark green in color with a pine scent.

Once you bring your tree home there are a few tips for care and display for lasting quality.

1. When cut, over half the tree is water; therefore it will need water to keep its fresh appearance. Place the tree trunk base in a bucket of water and store it in a cool place as soon as you get it home.
2. When preparing to place the tree in the stand remove a ½ inch thick disc of wood from the bottom of the trunk making a nice clean, straight cut, place the tree in the stand, and add water. (*Remember the stand should fit the tree trunk size and hold enough water to provide 1 quart of water per inch of trunk diameter. Never shave the trunk to fit the stand as this will result in the tree being unable to take up water.*)
3. Check the stand daily to be sure water level does not drop below the stem of the tree.
4. Lowering the temperature of the area where the tree is displayed will help delay the process of drying out. It's also important to keep the tree away from heat sources such as sunlight, fireplaces and heat vents.

For safety sake never keep a tree in the home once it becomes dry or brittle. When you dispose of your tree try to recycle it. Many tree farms or lots take trees back, or you may contact your

town hall for information on recycling after the holidays. Never burn any part of a Christmas tree in a wood stove or fireplace.

For more about this topic please contact Wendy Ulrich, Lab Technician, at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email ulricwg@aces.edu. You can also visit the National Christmas Tree Association website at <http://christmastree.org/>