

Choosing a Holiday Tree



Gloria Van Duyne

to cut...

By Gloria Van Duyne

One December years ago, my father said, “Why are you cutting a live Christmas tree? I thought you were an environmentalist.” I’m reminded of this comment every holiday season when I catch bits of other people’s conversations. I’m always surprised by the perception that cutting a real tree for the holidays is bad for the environment. The fact is that trees are a renewable resource, and growing and cutting them in a responsible way doesn’t harm the environment, and in fact provides excellent habitat for many species of wildlife.

I must first admit that I love the tradition of traipsing through the snow with my family to pick out and cut down our tree. Choosing and cutting our own tree is a treasured family tradition. My son Jack pelts my husband with snowballs, and depending on where we go, we sometimes take our collie, who practically explodes from the excitement of an outdoor adventure.

Of course, we can’t simply cut the first tree we like, but must first check out dozens of others to be sure we found the perfect one. And naturally the best trees



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are at least a half-mile walk away, but that's what makes it fun. And a real tree is the only way to go for us, not only as a great outdoor adventure, but as the better environmental choice when compared with an artificial tree.

In the past, Christmas trees were cut from forests. These days, they are grown on dedicated tree farms, just like corn and lettuce. The trees are planted as seedlings, specifically with the intent to cut and sell them. They will grow for several years before they are harvested, and then the area is replanted to start the next crop. Growers plant more than one seedling for each tree harvested. Currently, there are nearly half a billion trees growing on tree farms across the U.S.

In many ways, tree farms are beneficial to the environment. They prevent soil erosion, slow water runoff, and filter rain and snowmelt as it seeps down through the soil and tree roots. Tree farms also provide habitat for birds and other

wildlife. In addition, the trees capture pollutants that we would otherwise breathe in, and take in carbon dioxide while giving off oxygen.



Susan L. Shafer

The Saratoga Tree Nursery supplies seedlings to many Christmas tree farms across the state.

With increasing development in the state, tree farms provide important open space. Most Christmas tree farms began on agricultural land, either in pasture or row crops, and so maintain the rural character of the landscape. In addition, when you “buy locally” by purchasing a holiday tree from a nearby tree farm, you help reduce your carbon footprint.

I also enjoy the fact that when my family buys our holiday tree, we are contributing to the local economy. Holiday tree sales help landowners pay property taxes, and according to the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, New York ranks 7th in the nation for economic value of Christmas trees produced (\$8.8 million).

So when I hear people discussing the pros and cons of cutting a real tree for the holidays, I simply smile to myself. I feel good about my choice.

Gloria Van Duyne works for DEC's Division of Lands and Forests.



Susan L. Shafer

Many families choose to purchase real Christmas trees because they can be produced sustainably. Others simply like the fun and excitement of cutting their very own tree.

...or not to cut

By Debbie Jackson

While many people have a real tree during the holidays, others choose an artificial one. For some, it's simply a matter of preference or convenience, while for others it's a matter of economics or health. But which is the best environmental choice—a real tree that is used for only one season but can be recycled, or an artificial tree that can be used again and again but cannot be recycled?

Through the years, artificial trees have taken many forms—from the first one made by the Germans of goose feathers dyed green in the nineteenth century, to the early artificial trees in the U.S. made of brush bristles in the 1930s and those pink artificial aluminum trees of the 1960s. Today, artificial trees look just like their natural cousins.

Many people like artificial trees because they require very little care. Once they are set up, there's no watering, and when the holidays are over there is no mess to clean up. Artificial trees can also be less expensive to purchase, especially considering you can

amortize the cost over several years of use. Many artificial trees already come with LED lights attached, thus avoiding purchasing lights separately. And because they are LEDs, they can reduce your energy bill. For those with allergies or asthma, an artificial tree may be the only way to have a holiday tree.

If you're considering purchasing an artificial tree, remember that they cannot be recycled and so eventually end up in landfills. But if an artificial tree is in your future, look for one made in the U.S. instead of China—it supports our economy and helps lower your carbon footprint.

No matter which tree you choose—real or artificial—be sure to dispose of it properly (see sidebar). Because ultimately, we are all responsible for the health of our planet.

Debbie Jackson works for DEC's Division of Materials Management.



Remember to Reuse and Recycle

After the holidays, real trees can continue to provide benefits in a number of ways:

- Many communities have recycling programs in which holiday trees are chipped for mulch to use on gardens. Recycled trees have also been used to make barriers for soil erosion.

- Leaving the tree outside can provide shelter and protection for songbirds and other wildlife through the rest of the winter. You can also decorate it with popcorn, nuts, cranberries and bird food to make a natural birdfeeder.

- The tree needles and branches can be used as mulch under acid-loving plants like rhododendrons and holly.

- Fir tree needles can be stuffed into various sized pillows to keep dresser drawers or your sofa smelling evergreen.

While an artificial tree cannot be recycled, if it is still in usable condition, consider donating it to a local community group such as a school, church, town office or non-profit organization.

Be sure to check out DEC's website at www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/8829.html for more information on how to make your holiday purchasing choices "greener."



Susan L. Shafer

Today's artificial trees look just like their natural cousins.