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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

by Paul J. Pugliese

“Merry Christmas Trees”

Each year more than 40 million Americans buy Christmas trees. Fresh or precut, your Christmas tree should last the holidays. If you want to make sure your Christmas tree is fresh, cut it down yourself. But if you can't, you can still make sure the tree you pick stays fresh and merry until next year.

If you go to a cut-your-own farm, you know it's fresh. You won't find a fresher, healthier tree anywhere else. Georgia has more than 100 Christmas tree farms. To find the ones closest to you, visit the Georgia Christmas Tree Association Web site at www.gacta.com. Buying locally also helps support our farmers in Georgia. Christmas tree farms have been in decline in recent years. The rise in land values leaves little room for growing holiday trees for profit. We can't provide even half the amount of Christmas trees needed for our own state. With such a high demand for trees every year, current research efforts are under way to introduce new Christmas tree species for the Southeast.

Four main conifer species are grown in Georgia: Leyland cypress, Virginia pine, Arizona cypress and Eastern red cedar. Fraser fir, probably the most popular imported cut Christmas tree, can be good for small farms. The tree's stiff branches hold ornaments well. But there are limits to growing it in Georgia. There are few high-altitude places in Georgia for growing fir species. Fraser fir prefers altitudes higher than 3,000 feet to grow well.

But the state's own Christmas trees, such as the Leyland and Arizona cypress, are becoming more and more popular for other reasons. The Leyland cypress, a hybrid of Monterey cypress and Alaskan cedar, is grown in the South. Like the Arizona cypress, it can be cultivated in three to five years from seed to tree. Firs take five to eight years before they're harvested, which is why they are often more expensive.

Leylands are popular, too, because they're sterile trees. This means that no cones or pollen are produced, and the tree will not shed in your home, a great advantage if you suffer from allergies. You may run into many different types of Leyland cypress cultivars with scented foliage (Irish Mint), bluish foliage (Naylor's Blue) or variegated foliage (Jubilee). Arizona cypress, has two cultivars: Carolina Sapphire and Blue Ice. Both of these species make great cut Christmas trees, having good needle-holding ability and good fragrance. The only downfall is that the limb structure is weak and they don't support heavy ornaments well.

If trekking through a tree farm isn't appealing, precut Christmas trees are springing up at supermarkets, home and garden stores and empty lots around Georgia. Most trees sold at home improvement stores were grown somewhere in the North or West. They can cut a tree and have it shipped to Georgia in five days. Depending on the cost of gas, this can increase the cost of trees grown out of state.

To get the best prices and quality, buy a tree at the beginning of the holiday shopping season. Retail stores want to sell ornaments and lights and often give discounts on trees. Live tree prices are good the week before Christmas Day. But you'll sacrifice quality for price.

To test a cut tree for freshness, take a branch and lightly pull down on it. If you get one or two needles, it's okay. If you get a handful of needles, the tree is not fresh.

Tips for a merry Christmas tree:

- **Measure** the area that you need it to go before you go buy the tree. The tree could end up taking up half of your living room if you don't.

- **Pick** the right kind of tree. Red cedars, for example, dry out very quickly if not watered properly. You also should inspect the tree for any hidden critters such as squirrels—remember Chevy Chase?
- **Cut** a half-inch off the tree's base when you get it home. This unseals the sap residue on the trunk and allows the tree to take up water.
- **Water** the tree within 20 minutes of making the cut at home. Secure your tree in its base first. A tree will consume a gallon of water the first two days, and as much as two pints per day after that. Make sure the end of the trunk stays at least 1 inch below water level at all times.
- **Re-cut** the base another half-inch if the water dries out. Don't do this on a daily basis or by Christmas your tree will be much shorter. You might decide it's easier to NOT let the tree dry out in the first place!
- **Preserve** the tree by keeping the tree out of direct sunlight and away from direct contact with heat registers. Adding store bought preservatives to the water might help keep the tree healthy by curbing bacterial growth.

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