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# How to Buy a CHRISTMAS TREE



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

# How to Buy a CHRISTMAS TREE



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The tradition of a decorated Christmas tree in the United States may date back to the Revolutionary War, when homesick Hessian troops cut and decorated fir trees as was their German custom.

Since then, the Christmas tree—with its forest fragrance and freshness—has come to represent the Yule season. It is the mainstay of both indoor and outdoor holiday decorations.

Today, selecting the perfect Christmas tree is one of the highlights of many families' pre-holiday preparations. Choosing a tree that is "just right" for you will be easier if you know what species you are looking for, the different features that indicate a good tree, and how to select and maintain freshness.

## **Species**

Practically all species of evergreens are used for Christmas trees, although some are more popular and are in greater supply than others. No one species can be considered the best all-around Christmas tree, for each has its own individual characteristics. Although people in some areas of the country have a preference for a certain species, there are five that are most widely grown and sold. Each one is not available to consumers in every part of the country.



The **Balsam fir** has short, flat dark green needles, usually rounded at the tips. The needles are arranged feather-like on grayish, finely hairy twigs. The tiny twigs grow at right angles to each branch, resembling crosses (perhaps a reason for their popularity at Christmas), and the rounded bud tips are coated with a waxy pitch.

When cones are present on the Balsam fir, they are attached upright to the branch and are 2 to 3 inches long. They are purple and often resinous.

The bark of the Balsam fir is gray or brown, thin and quite smooth—often with many resin blisters.

*Note: Sketches of trees were provided by the Forest Service.*



Another short needled fir, the **Douglas fir** has needles that are attached around the twig instead of in the feather-like arrangement of the Balsam fir.

The needles are short-stalked, soft and pliable and are dark yellow-green or blue-green.

While most true fir trees have rounded blunt buds, as you will find in the Balsam fir, the Douglas has reddish-brown buds that narrow at the tip into a sharp point.

The cones make identification of the Douglas fir very easy, for they hang downward with long 3-toothed leaf-like bracts sticking out conspicuously beyond the tips of the thin, rounded cone scales. These light brown cones are from 2 to 4 inches long.

The bark of the tree is dark or reddish brown.



It usually is easy to identify an **Eastern Redcedar** because its characteristics are so different from the other Christmas tree species. The Redcedar has extremely short, dark blue-green, scale-like leaves.

However, the leading shoots bear needle-like leaves almost half an inch long and the leafy twigs are rounded or four-angled and slender.

Like its western cousin, the juniper, the Redcedar bears berry-like fruit. The small round berries are dark blue and the bark of the tree is reddish-brown and fibrous.



The **Scotch Pine**, a very fast growing tree, has needles longer than the Balsam and Douglas firs. The needles grow in clusters of two and are dark blue-green in color, usually twisted, and from  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches long. However, within the past several years several varieties have been produced with shorter needles.

With proper pruning and trimming the Scotch pine can be made very bushy, which is a desirable characteristic for a Christmas tree. It is a very popular tree partly because it holds its needles longer than most others.

The Scotch Pine has cones between two and five inches long. The top of the scales are flat with a slender prickle.

The bark is scaly and bright orange-red, but somewhat darker on older trees.



Both eastern and western **White Pines** are very much alike, with silvery blue-green needles that are soft to the touch.

The very slender Eastern pine needles are quite long—2½ to 5 inches—and are grouped together in clusters of five. The needles of the western White Pine are shorter and stouter.

The eastern White Pine has long stalked, yellow-brown cones with thin round scales. The cones of the western variety are very similar, but longer.

The thin, smooth bark of both species is grayish green to dark green.



## U.S. Grades

Over a decade ago, the Agricultural Marketing Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture established voluntary standards of quality for Christmas trees.

In selecting just the right tree for decorating, most people look for a tree that is healthy, free from damage, and well-trimmed. They generally want a tree that tapers gently from a full bottom and has an ample number of branches for hanging ornaments.

Trees meeting a U.S. grade will have these characteristics, since the grade standards require that the trees be:

**Fresh**—with pliable needles that are firmly attached to the branches.

**Clean**—practically free from vines or other undesirable foreign material.

**Healthy**—fresh, natural appearance for particular species.

**Well-trimmed**—free of all barren branches below the first whorl of foliated branches and smoothly cut at the butt.

In addition, the specific requirements of each grade are:

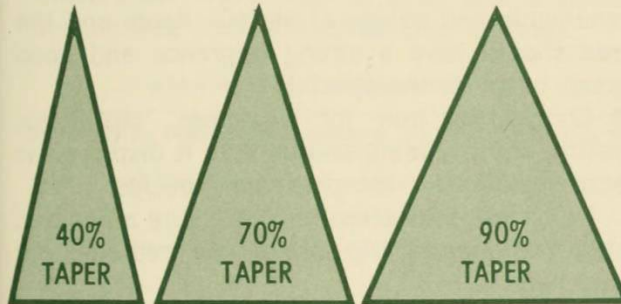
**U.S. Premium:** not less than medium density, normal taper, and all four faces (sides) free from any type of damage.

**U.S. No. 1 or U.S. Choice:** not less than medium density, normal taper, and three damage-free faces.

**U.S. No. 2 or U.S. Standard:** light or better density; candlestick, normal, or flaring taper; and at least two adjacent damage-free faces.



Although these voluntary standards are used mainly by the wholesale trade, they can be used with good results by anyone to determine the quality of a tree. Premium or U.S. No. 1 grades mean high quality. Even a U.S. No. 2 tree, placed in a corner with its "good" faces toward the room, may be very attractive.



### Christmas Tree Taper

The percent taper means the relationship of the width of the tree to its height. For example, 70 percent taper means the width is 70 percent of the height.

less than 40%	.....	Candlestick
40—90%	.....	Normal
more than 90%	.....	Flaring

### Selecting a Tree

A few simple procedures can make the selection of a "perfect" Christmas tree easier.

- Determine where in your home you will display your tree. With this in mind, you will be able to tell what height you will need and whether all four sides must be suitable for display.
- You should select a tree that is the right height for the space you have chosen for it. Cutting large portions off either end will alter the natural taper of the tree.

- Freshness is an important key when selecting your tree. The needles should be resilient, but not brittle. Run your finger down a branch—the needles should adhere to each twig.
- Shake or bounce the tree on the ground lightly to see that the needles are firmly attached. If only a few drop off, the tree is fresh and with proper care should retain its freshness indoors throughout the holiday season.
- The limbs should be strong enough to hold ornaments and strings of electric lights and the tree should have a strong fragrance and good green color for the species.
- Check the tree for freshness, cleanness, health, and trimming and be sure it displays the best qualities for the particular species.

Following these steps should insure a healthy, attractive tree, but the care of your tree does not stop here.

### **Christmas Tree Care**

- If you buy your tree several days before it will be set up and decorated, store it outside. Cut the butt of the tree at a diagonal about one inch above the original cut—this opens the pores and aids in the absorption of water. Place the butt end in a container of water.
- When you bring it into the house, saw the butt again, squaring off the diagonal. This facilitates placing the tree in a stand as well as aiding absorption.
- Keep the butt end of the tree in a container of water the entire time it is in the house. Refill the container daily as the tree requires a lot of water. Sprinkling water on the branches and needles before you decorate the tree will help retain freshness.
- Be sure that the base of the tree is well-supported and the tree is placed away from fireplaces, radiators, electric heaters, televisions or any other source of heat.
- Open flames, such as lighted candles, should never be used on or near the tree. In addition, never leave your home with the Christmas tree lights still on.

● The longer the tree is indoors, the more combustible it will become. Check electric light cords for fraying and worn spots that could easily lead to fires. Also do not overload the electric circuits and avoid placing electric toys directly under the tree. Be sure to avoid the use of combustible decorations.

Following these care and precaution measures should insure an attractive tree that stays fresh indoors for more than a week and a holiday season free from Christmas tree mishaps.

☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1976—O-224-288

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# How to Buy a CHRISTMAS TREE



## LOOK FOR QUALITY

- Fresh
- Clean
- Healthy
- Well-trimmed
- Good Shape

## BE SURE OF FRESHNESS

- Firm needles—not brittle
- Strong fragrance
- Good green color for species

AGRICULTURAL MARKETING SERVICE  
HOME AND GARDEN BULLETIN NO. 189  
OCTOBER 1971  
SLIGHTLY REVISED NOVEMBER 1976