

Home & Garden Mimeo # HG 46

Selecting and Caring for a Live Christmas Tree

A live Christmas tree can serve two functions. It can be used to decorate the home during the Christmas season and then as a decorative plant in the landscape. However, if you are going to be successful in growing your live Christmas tree, it is important that you care for it properly after you buy it, when you bring it in the home, and after you plant it outdoors. A live tree can be very heavy to lift. A 5-6 foot, balled and burlapped tree may weigh 150-200 pounds.

Before you decide to buy a live Christmas tree, make certain that you have room for it in your landscape. Remember that Christmas trees are young forest trees that will eventually grow into large timber trees given sufficient time and care. They should not be used in foundation plantings. They should be used in living fences, or as specimen plants with plenty of elbowroom.

Before the ground freezes, prepare the hole where the living Christmas tree will be planted. The hole should be 3 times the diameter of the root ball and as deep. The hole should have square sides and a flat bottom. Cover the hole with boards to prevent accidents and add a 3-4 inch layer of mulch to lessen frozen soil. If possible, store the soil from the hole inside your home to prevent freezing.

As soon as you purchase your living Christmas tree, spray the needles thoroughly with an anti-transpirant material such as Vapor-guard or Wilt-Pruf. Follow the directions on the container. Check the root ball to make certain that the soil is moist. If the soil feels dry, place the root ball in a tub with 1 to 2 inches of warm water for 1 hour. Next, store the plant outdoors in a shaded area protected from wind and sun until you are ready to bring the plant into the home for decorating. Don't allow the root ball to freeze.

The survival of a living Christmas tree is dependent on the winter hardiness of that plant. The longer you keep your tree in the home the less winter hardy it will become. Therefore, it is recommended that you keep your living Christmas tree in the home no more than 7 days. If the temperature in the home is greater than 70° F., reduce the time the tree is indoors to only 5 days. Long periods of warm temperature

reduce the winter hardiness of plants. You may consider not using decorative lights, since they can give off heat that will damage the needles. It is important that you water the plant frequently to prevent the soil from drying.

As soon as you remove the decorations, move the tree outdoors. If the weather is cold, re-acclimate your tree to outside temperatures by storing it on a sheltered porch or in a garage for several days.

Remove the mulch and place the tree in the prepared hole making certain that the root ball is at its original planting depth or slightly higher if you have heavy soil. Fill the space around the root ball half full of soil and pack firmly. Loosen the burlap from around the root ball and fold or cut the burlap down to the packed soil. Finish filling the space.

If your living Christmas tree is potted, rather than a ball and burlap tree, carefully remove the pot. If the roots are in a tight mass on the outside of the rootball, use a knife and cut or pry some of the roots loose so that they will grow out into the soil rather than continue growing in a pot-like configuration. Place the root ball into the planting hole so that the top of the root ball is equal with, or slightly higher than, the top of the hole. Fill with soil.

After the space has been filled, build a small dike of soil 3 to 4 inches high, around the outer edges of the hole for water. Place 3 to 5 gallons of water in the diked area and allow it to seep into the ground.

Anchor the tree to the ground with three pieces of clothesline tied to three stakes pounded into the ground outside the diked area. To lessen the chances of bark damage, avoid using wire on the tree.

Re-use the mulch under the tree after planting. To prevent deep freezing of the soil, these materials should be applied 3 to 4 inches thick.

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To reduce the possibility of winter injury to the needles, wrap the tree with burlap or cheese cloth. Do not use plastic. The tree is most easily wrapped by first tying its branches with any good package string. This is done by tying the loose end of the string to a good strong branch at the base of the tree. Next go around the tree lifting the branches and holding them in place with the string. After you have spiraled around the tree 3 to 4 times, tie the cut end of the string to the stem. Now that the branches have been secured, wrap the tree with the cheesecloth or burlap. Safety pins may be used to hold these materials in place. Remove the covering and loosen the branches around mid-March.

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