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Selecting and Caring for Real Christmas Trees

(Chesterfield, MO)- Keeping a farm-grown Christmas Tree fresh is fairly simple if consumers learn to separate proper tree care information from the many wives tales that are so popular. Every year, the National Christmas Tree Association (NCTA) fields hundreds of questions about how to care for a Real Christmas Tree. Here are some of the basic tips.

Fresh, farm-grown Christmas Trees may be purchased from either retail lots or Choose & Cut farms. When purchasing a cut tree, the freshness depends upon the care the trees have received. Pay attention to the manner in which trees are stored and displayed. For example, are they stored under shade, displayed standing in water or misted at night, especially in warm weather areas? If so, the lot operator is working hard to keep the trees fresh as possible.

One simple test for freshness is to gently grasp a branch between your thumb and forefinger and pull it toward you. Very few needles should come off in your hand if the tree is fresh. Shake or bounce the tree on its stump. You should not see an excessive amount of green needles fall to the ground. Some loss of interior brown needles is normal and will occur over the lifetime of a tree.

Make a fresh cut off the bottom of the trunk one quarter to one half inch from the bottom, many farm and lot operators will do this for you. Get the trunk in water within 3-6 hours. The stand you use should hold at least one quart of water for every inch diameter of the trunk once the tree is in the stand. For example, a typical six foot tall tree will have a four inch diameter trunk so the stand should hold at least four quarts (1 gallon) of water after the tree is set up.

Beware of Tree Care Myths

Misinformation about proper tree care can reduce the enjoyment of a Real Christmas Tree. Unfortunately, many well-intended, but poorly informed sources spread ineffective home remedies that have no scientific basis. The following questions represent some of the more common myths. The answers are based on extensive tree keepability research at several universities and experiment stations.

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Is it okay to buy a tree that is losing its needles? Some natural drop of older, interior needles is natural and normal. However, if the color is faded, the bark of the outer twigs is wrinkled and the green, exterior needles easily fall off at a gentle touch or when the tree is bounced on a hard surface, it is excessively dry.

Is a fresh cut really necessary before putting a tree in a water stand? Always make a fresh cut if possible. After time, the cut stump gets air in the soft plant tissue, which lessens a tree's water absorption capacity. A fresh cut will reopen the pores and plant tissue that take up water.

How much should be cut off? Only one half inch is necessary, not one or two inches as is sometimes instructed.

Will tapering the base or cutting it at an angle increase the area that takes up water? No. The most efficient water transporting cells are just below the bark. Once the water level falls below the exposed surface on a tapered trunk, drying will begin. An angle or "V" cut will require more water depth to cover the cut surface. It also makes the tree more difficult to hold upright in a stand and less stable.

Should I add bleach, aspirin, fertilizer or other things to the water to make trees last longer? No! Research has shown that plain tap water is the most consistent method to maintain moisture levels across all species of trees. Water holding stands that are kept filled with plain water will extend the freshness of trees for weeks.

How large should my water stand be? Choosing a large capacity stand is one of the most important steps to maintaining tree freshness. Avoid small "coffee cup" stands. Check the water level frequently since trees can drink large amounts of water each day, particularly pre-cut trees during the first week of display. Generally, a tree can use up to one quart of water per day for each inch of stem diameter. Therefore, a stand that will hold a four-inch trunk should hold at least one gallon of water with the tree in the stand.

For additional selection and care tips of your fresh, farm-grown Real Christmas Tree, visit NCTA at www.realchristmastrees.org or ask your local Christmas Tree Professional.
