

Caring for a Living Christmas Tree

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Thinking about purchasing a living Christmas tree this year? It's a great double-duty choice. You'll have the benefit of a tree to decorate for the holidays and a beautiful addition to your landscape afterwards.

For starters, select the location in your yard where the tree will be planted. Remember that evergreens will eventually grow to be quite large, so plan accordingly. If you live in an area where the ground is likely to be frozen in late December, it will be best to dig the planting hole as soon as possible, when the ground is not rock-hard. Be sure to cover the hole with some boards to avoid making it a hazard. Even if it doesn't freeze in your area, chances are it will be warmer outside in November than January, when you plant the tree, so you may just want to dig the planting hole early.

Most trees will be sold in containers, but you may find some that have the root ball wrapped in burlap. Don't bring the tree inside right away. Instead, let it get used to what will be a change in climate by leaving it in the garage or on a covered porch for a few days to ease the transition to the indoors. Keep the tree well watered, and do not allow it to freeze. Hose or brush the tree off so you won't be bringing any unwelcome debris or insects into your home. Once inside, place the tree away from heating ducts or the fireplace or wood stove. You may want to consider treating the tree (before you bring it inside) with an anti-transpirant like "Cloud Cover" or "Wilt-Pruf". These products are often used to protect a plant from freezing weather, but they also work to hold moisture in the plant when exposed to drying conditions. You will find one or both of these products at local nurseries.

It is not recommended that you keep the tree indoors for more than seven days. Long periods at warm temperatures may reduce the tree's hardiness. Before you plant the tree, re-acclimate it to the outdoors by moving it back to the garage or on a covered porch for a few days. When planting the tree, ensure that the top of the root ball or tree crown is placed at or slightly above ground level. Water the tree deeply with three to five gallons of water. Anchor the tree by staking it in three places. Apply mulch to a depth of three to four inches. If freezing weather is predicted, wrap the tree in burlap.

Colorado Blue Spruce (*Picea pungens* 'Glauca'), Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and White Fir (*Abies concolor*) are some of the most popular choices for living Christmas trees. These are moderate to fast growers, depending on your elevation. The Silver Tip, also known as a Red Fir (*Abies magnifica*), is a good choice, but only if you live above 3,000 feet. The Serbian Spruce (*Picea omorika*) and Dwarf Alberta Spruce (*Picea glauca* 'Conica') are also attractive and very conical in shape. These two cultivars are very slow growing.

No class is scheduled this Saturday, November 27 due to the Thanksgiving holiday. Our next free class will be on Saturday, December 4. Master Gardeners will present "Selecting and Planting Fruit Trees." The class is from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. and will be held in the Veterans Memorial Building at 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville.

UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Gardener/.