

CHRISTMAS TREES: 'TIS THE SEASON!

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Generally speaking, there are three main options for Christmas trees: real, artificial, and live. Real trees are what come to mind when you think about cutting down your own tree or visiting a seasonal “tree stand” to pick out the perfect tree. Artificial trees, also known as fake trees, are made of plastic, metal, and other synthetic materials and can be purchased from various retailers. Live trees refer to trees that are potted and can even be planted in your backyard after the holiday season is over.

What kind of tree should I get?

The choice is entirely up to you! Artificial trees have the benefit of making less of a mess over the month but real and live trees can be a more eco-friendly option. You may be thinking, “How is that possible if we have to cut down a tree?” While growing in Christmas tree farms, as most are these days, Christmas trees produce oxygen, stabilize soil, are an agricultural product, store carbon, and provide wildlife habitat and food for many years.

In Polk County, there are numerous stores, tree stands, and small farms selling real, live and artificial trees. Some things to keep in mind when you shop:

- Artificial trees are usually imported. If you desire a “Made in the USA” tree, check the label for country of origin or purchase a live or



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- real tree instead.
- Live trees can be planted in your yard after the holidays if you choose a variety that is suited for your area.
- Artificial trees can be stored and used for several years before they may need replacing. Unfortunately, they tend to require a large amount of storage space.
- Live and real trees have a bad reputation for being a fire hazard. Demonstrations by fire departments suggest that a well-cared for real tree or live tree is more fire resistant than dry trees or artificial trees. Keep all kinds of Christmas trees away from heat sources like portable heaters and fireplaces to reduce fire risk.
- The variety of Christmas tree you get plays a big role in its color, scent, and longevity. If you have a lot of large ornaments, consider getting a pine or fir variety; they have stronger

branches than Leyland cypress and other varieties.

How do I care for a live or real tree?

Ask anyone and they'll likely have a sure-fire way to keep your tree fresh as the day it was cut all through December. Most of these methods, like sugar, an old penny, or spoons in the stand won't hurt the tree but they aren't especially helpful either. And one method, the sugar method, could attract ants or other insects to the "party." The most important thing you can do is keep your tree well-watered. See the tips below for additional ways to keep your tree fresh:

- All Christmas tree varieties lose needles more frequently as they dry out. Keep your "real" tree well-watered to keep it fresh.
- Any fresh tree, live or real, should be kept in a cool area of the house, away from heat sources, to help prevent it from drying out.
- Fresh cut stumps help trees last longer by encouraging the tree to take in water quickly. You can help your real tree last longer by asking the tree vendor for a fresh cut and placing the tree in a stand with water within one hour.

Can I cut a tree locally?

Interested in cutting your own tree? Consider visiting the one of the many Christmas tree farms in Florida, or the Lake Wales Ridge State Forest. There are several Christmas tree farms in Central Florida and the Lake Wales Ridge State Forest offers tree cutting for a few days each year with a permit. Each farm offers a few Christmas tree varieties while the Lake Wales Ridge State Forest allows people to cut one Sand Pine (*Pinus clausa*) 15 feet or less in height.

Where can I find more information?

For information on Florida Christmas tree farms, check the Florida Christmas Tree Association's website

www.flchristmastrees.com/Farms/Index.htm.

For information on the Lake Wales Ridge State Forest tree-cutting, call their office at (863) 589-0545. To participate, you must buy a \$10 permit and bring your own saw (hand-saw only). Prior to going out for your tree, you must stop by the office to purchase your permit. Learn more about the sale here: <http://bit.ly/LWCTS2016>.

For more information on Christmas tree fire safety and demonstration videos, check out the National Institute of Standards and Technology's website www.fire.nist.gov/tree_fire.htm.

Or, Call your County Extension Agent:

Shannon Carnevale
Natural Resources and Conservation
Extension Agent

scarnevale@ufl.edu

863-519-1051

<http://polk.ifas.ufl.edu>