A decorated pine tree has long been a symbol of Christmas. It is the centerpiece of the home during the holidays. Heirloom balls are lovingly placed on the branches. Gifts are piled under the boughs. The colored lights on the tree twinkle and shine.

When the New Year arrives, many people simply remove the ornaments and lights and dispose of the tree. Isn't that a sad fate for such a cherished icon?

Perhaps we should rethink this. The International Society of Arboriculture says that planting a live Christmas tree provides not only a habitat for birds and wildlife; it also replenishes the air with oxygen, increases soil stability, and generally makes your yard more beautiful. Doesn't that make you feel guilty for buying a tree and throwing it away?

You may think planting a live tree during the winter is difficult. Well, it is not as difficult as you may think.

There are a few conditions to consider. First, you must choose the type of tree that will fit the space you have indoors, but you must give serious thought to where the tree will be planted once it goes outdoors. The International Society of Arboriculture states that most species of trees used for Christmas trees are pine and spruce. These trees can grow to be more than 50 feet tall and 20 feet wide.

Whatever species of tree that your family chooses must be a healthy one. When you purchase a balled and burlapped tree, choose a tree with a solid soil ball. Remember the smaller the tree, the better chance of survival. A small tree is less expensive and easier to handle. The size and weight of a large tree can make lugging the tree into the house and through doorways a real challenge.

You have chosen the tree and the planting site. The tree is resting outside your door. You must gradually introduce your living tree from outside to inside. Store the tree in the garage or enclosed porch for three or four
days. A tree that is dormant and exposed to immediate warmth will start to grow. You want to avoid any quick resumption of growth.

While the tree is introduced into the house via the porch or garage, check for critters and insect egg masses as the tree acclimates. Keep the soil ball moist and make sure that it does not freeze. If the temperature in the storage area does drop below freezing, place straw or other insulating materials around the soil ball.

Visit your lawn and garden supply store and purchase a spray with antidessicant or an antiwilt product to minimize needle loss. This product will also contain the loss of valuable moisture while in a climate controlled home.

Locate your tree in the coolest part of the room and away from heat sources, such as a fireplace, heating ducts, etc. Place the tree in a galvanized tub to stabilize it. This helps confine the water and needles into a manageable space. Use rocks or bricks to position it in an upright and straight position if it is in a pot. If the tree is one that is wrapped and balled in burlap, fill the empty space around and on top of the ball with mulch to retain as much moisture as possible. Water your tree as often as necessary to moisten the roots but not make them soggy.

The longer your tree stays inside the less chance it has of survival when planted outdoors. The maximum you should keep it indoors is 7 to 10 days. Never add nutrients or fertilizers as that may initiate growth. This is something you definitely don't want.

Decorating the tree should be done gently. Ornaments tinsel, and lights may be used. Don't apply flocking or artificial snow to the tree.

When Christmas is over, remove the tree from the house and place it in a cool location. Make the transition from indoors to outdoors a reversal of the process you used to bring it indoors.

On a relatively mild winter day, plant the tree. Make sure that the hole is 2 to 5 times wider than the root ball. Be sure not to plant the tree too deeply. It should be planted at the same depth it was grown at the nursery. In the bottom and center of the hole, leave a planting base of undisturbed soil. Do not over prepare the backfill with organic matter.

Remove the synthetic burlap completely because it can cause root girdling. Remove natural burlap from the top of the root ball to avoid drying out the root ball.

If the tree is in a container, cut and loosen any encircling roots and prune broken roots.

Fill the hole around the freshly set tree with loosened, un-amended soil from the planting hole. Backfill around the root ball in stages, gently firming each layer of soil. Water well to settle the soil and eliminate air pockets. Apply 2 to 3 inches of mulch on top of the root ball, keeping the mulch away from the trunk of the tree.
Use any remaining soil to build a ridge 3 to 4 inches high around the outside edge of the soil ball. This bowl will help hold water when watering.

Following these tips will ensure that your Christmas tree will make it to another Christmas. For many years to come, you can treasure the tree that once stood in your home. It will grow as your children grow. What a gift to yourself and the environment!

For more information on Christmas Trees and Holiday plants contact The University of Arizona Mohave County Cooperative Extension, 101 E. Beale Street, Suite A, Kingman AZ 86401-5808 or telephone (928) 753-3788.

**ALSO, watch for more information on the upcoming Workshops sponsored by The University of Arizona and the Kingman Area Master Gardeners.**


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