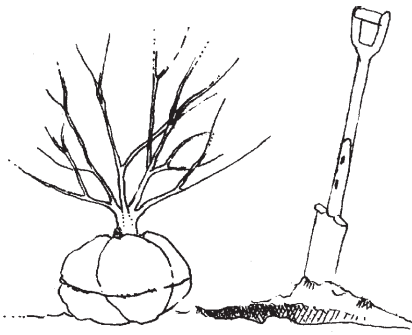


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Living Christmas Trees for the Holidays and Beyond

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Living Christmas trees (roots and soil) are purchased for indoor enjoyment during the holidays and for outdoor enjoyment as landscape trees when the holidays are over. Purchasing a living tree and successfully establishing it in the landscape can make holiday memories live on as the tree grows each year. But success requires advanced planning and preparation.

Live trees are normally sold as balled and burlapped or potted stock. They cost more than cut trees, and, unlike similar nursery stock sold at normal transplanting times, the survival of a living Christmas tree is seldom guaranteed by the seller. To growing numbers of people, however, the chance to make holiday memories last and to add to the landscape rather than the landfill are worth the extra expense and effort involved.

Species Selection

Scotch pine is the most commonly grown Christmas tree in Indiana. It is a fine cut Christmas tree, but a poor landscape tree. This species usually succumbs to insects and/or disease and dies in less than 25 years. White pine, various spruce, and white fir are better choices.

Indoor Care

There are challenges to enjoying the tree indoors and successfully planting it outdoors so that it survives. For one thing, a living Christmas tree is heavy. A 5-6 foot balled and burlapped tree with its soil ball may weigh 100-200 pounds. So remember to consider the weight of the root ball when you are looking for a "nice, big tree." Be prepared to lug it into the house. A sturdy basket with handles or a cart or wagon is helpful.

Also, live trees should not remain indoors for more than three to five days. The plant's buds must remain dormant in order to avoid winter kill once it is moved outdoors.

While the tree is indoors, don't let the soil and root ball dry out. The ball can be placed in a tub and kept moist with straw or peat moss packed around it to retain the moisture and provide insulation. Sheet plastic may also be used. Keep the tree in a cool room away from hot or cold drafts, and water as needed to prevent the soil and root ball from drying.

Site Selection

Regardless of the evergreen species selected, choose a sunny site with well-drained soil for its permanent landscape location. Remember in placing the tree that most evergreen trees will grow at least 10-15 feet wide and 30 feet or more tall. So select a location with plenty of room.

Planting and Establishment

Following the holidays, it is best to provide a gradual transition for the tree from indoors to outdoors. Let the tree spend a few days in a cool area protected from the wind, such as a garage, rather than abruptly planting it outdoors. This is especially desirable if the weather is extremely cold and windy.

In Indiana, pre-digging the planting hole is good insurance against the possibility of frozen ground after the holidays. Bring the soil indoors to insure that there will be unfrozen soil available at planting time. Another option is to deeply mulch the planting site before Christmas. Then remove the mulch and dig the hole at planting time.

Evergreens are prone to winter injury from desiccation because they continue to lose water through their needles during the winter. Trees with unestablished root systems, such as newly planted living Christmas trees, are especially vulnerable. After planting, water thoroughly and stake the plant in place. An anti-desiccant spray applied to the foliage may be helpful in reducing water loss.

Summary

Purchasing a living Christmas tree with the assumption that it will survive after planting in January in Indiana is risky. With proper preparation, care, and planting, however, you can increase the likelihood of success and have many years of pleasant holiday memories.

For more information on the subject discussed in this publication, consult your local office of the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service.
