

Holiday Agriculture - Christmas Trees

The Beginning of the Christmas Tree

The first recorded reference to the Christmas tree dates back to 16th century Germany. It is said that a young priest went to Northern Germany in the eighth century to convert the people there. When he arrived he found them worshipping a huge oak tree and they were preparing to sacrifice their young prince Olaf to the god. He stopped the sacrifice, chopped down the tree, and while living with, converted them to Christianity. One day, as he was riding through the forest where he had chopped down the big oak tree, was a beautiful evergreen tree. Because it stayed green all year round (it was "ever-living") and its top pointed toward Heaven, he called it the Christ-tree. In the 16th century, Martin Luther brought an evergreen tree into the church to celebrate Jesus' birthday. Because the service was called the Christ Mass, the tree became known as the Christmas tree.

Christmas Tree in the US

The tradition of the Christmas tree was brought to the US by German settlers and Hessian soldiers paid to fight in the American Revolutionary War. Franklin Pierce, our 14th president, brought the Christmas tree tradition to the White House. President Calvin Coolidge started the National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony in 1923. Since 1966, the winner of the National Christmas Tree Association "Most Perfect Christmas Tree" has presented a Christmas tree to the First Family. The White House Christmas tree is displayed in the Blue Room of the White House each year. Christmas trees were first commercially grown in Texas in 1977. There are approximately 25-30 million real Christmas trees sold in the U.S. every year. There are close to 350 million real Christmas trees currently growing on Christmas tree farms in the U.S. alone, all planted by farmers. These trees are grown as a harvestable crop. Texas Christmas trees are grown by local farmers on Texas land that you visit to pick out your own tree. According to the U.S. Commerce Department., 80 percent of artificial trees worldwide are manufactured in China.

Types of Trees Grown in Texas

Because of the hot summers and warm nights, there are a limited number of Christmas trees that can be grown in Texas. These are the most common:

Virginia Pine: The most common Christmas tree in the south, Virginia Pine is a short-needed pine with pleasant pine fragrance, dense foliage and strong limbs.

Afghan Pine: Often found in west Texas, the Afghan Pine looks like the Virginia Pine

Leyland Cypress: Allergic to trees? This tree is a hybrid of an Alaska-Cedar and a Monterey Cypress – meaning there is no pollen to irritate those sensitive to tree pollen.

Eastern Red Cedar: is the traditional native tree that many remember from their childhood.

Carolina Sapphire: is a cultivar of Arizona cypress. Grown on a limited basis across the South, its best characteristics include fast growth, a beautiful blue color and an excellent aroma.

How to Grow a Christmas Tree

How much land is needed to grow Christmas trees?

The amount of land needed is determined by the rows and spacing of trees. With eight foot centers between trees, 681 trees per acre can be planted. Nine foot row spacing yields 538 trees per acre. A Christmas tree grower determines spacing by the width of their mowing and spraying equipment. Some growers with small lawn tractors may plant on seven foot centers, but most growers plant their rows eight or nine feet wide.

How long does it take to grow a Texas Christmas tree?

On average, it takes three to six years for a tree to grow six to eight feet tall. Trees which are irrigated may grow faster. Since trees planted this year will be available for sale in four to five years, growers lay out plots to be planted over the next four to five years.

What kind of trees are grown in Texas?

The type of trees planted at a Christmas tree farm is determined by each farm's soil composition. Research has determined which trees work well with different soil types. The major tree species in the acidic soil of East Texas is the Virginia Pine. The best species for the alkaline soils of Central and West Texas are the Eldarica or Afghan Pine. The Leyland Cypress is showing success in both areas. There are about 350,000 acres in production for growing Christmas trees in the US, much of it preserving green space.

When are new trees planted?

For every tree that is harvested during the Christmas season, one to three seedlings is planted in its place. This is done in the beginning of the new year. In Texas, many Christmas tree farms are situated on land that is not useful for other crops, providing a habitat for wildlife.

What kind of equipment do Christmas tree growers use?

Each farm is different, but many Texas Christmas tree growers use a variety of equipment to maintain the farm throughout the year, including:

Mower, Backpack sprayer, Hand pruners, A dibble bar, A shearing knife, Pine tip moth monitors, Protective gear

How much time does it take to maintain a Christmas tree farm?

Maintaining a Christmas tree farm is a yearwater-round job.

The major maintenance activities include weed control, insect control and tree shaping.

The amount of maintenance a Christmas tree farm requires depends on the amount of trees that farm has plant. Some growers may find that planting 500 to 2,000 trees per year provides the right amount of work for their free time. Full-time growers may plant 5,000 to 10,000 trees per year.

Tips on Caring for Your Fresh-cut Christmas Tree

Real trees need water, just like a fresh bouquet of flowers. When you bring the tree home, make a fresh cut one-quarter inch or more above the original cut until you reach fresh wood. This removes the sap seal, allowing your tree to absorb water. Trees are very thirsty, so make sure to keep it watered. A Christmas tree may drink one gallon or more of fresh water per day for the first few days, then decrease their intake. In the house, place the tree away from fireplaces and other heat sources. Carefully check all electric light and connections before decorating the tree and home. Do not use lights with worn or frayed cords and NEVER use lighted candles. At the end of the holiday season, be sure to recycle your Christmas tree. Go to www.earth911.com or check with your city or county to see what options they have for recycling your tree.

Recycle Your Christmas Tree

Your real Christmas tree is a renewable resource. It is grown as a harvestable crop and once you cut it down for your home, the farmers replant new trees for future Christmas seasons. Because Christmas trees are all natural, they are biodegradable and have a variety of uses including:

Mulch (many cities and counties offer free mulch from recycled trees)

Beach erosion prevention

River shoreline stabilization

Fish habitat

Marshland sedimentation

Where to Recycle Your Tree

Make sure at the end of the Christmas season, that you recycle your tree to give back to the environment. Real Christmas trees are a renewable, recyclable resource. Artificial trees contain non-biodegradable plastics and possible metal toxins such as lead. There are more than 4,000 local Christmas tree recycling programs throughout the U.S.

Source: Texas Christmas Tree Growers Association