



Green Garden News

Christmas Trees—Past to Present

The Christmas tree is one of our most popular and enduring symbols of the Christmas Season. Its roots can be traced back to antiquity. The story of the Christmas tree is an interesting account of historical continuity linking the past with the present.

Much of the following information comes from Dr. Bob Black, retired UF/IFAS Extension Horticulturist, the National Christmas Tree Association and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

The Christmas tree gets its name from the Christian celebration but trees and boughs were widely used for religious ceremonies before the emergence of Christianity. In ancient Egypt, people celebrated the beginning of the winter season by bringing green date palms into their homes. The plants symbolized "life triumphs over death," a theme that carries over into our present custom. Romans used evergreen boughs to celebrate their Feast of Saturn, which also occurred at the winter solstice, to mark the return of the sun. This feast was marked by eating, merrymaking, exchanging of gifts and decorating houses with candles and greenery.

After Christianity was accepted, Roman church leaders replaced the Feast of Saturn with Christmas. They marked December 25 as the day the birth of Christ would be celebrated. Many of the Feast of Saturn traditions carried over

into the celebration of Christmas.

The custom of decorating evergreen trees possibly began with the very early forest dwellers. They often hung gifts of food on tree branches as offerings or sacrifices. The oldest reference to a decorated tree inside the home dates back to 1605 Germany.

Decorations included fruit, ribbons, nuts, strings and colored paper. The early Christmas trees were small tabletop trees. It is thought that the large floor-to-ceiling Christmas tree began in the United States. Candles of the early years gave way to electric lights beginning in the late 1800's. By the early 1930's most American homes were brightened by Christmas trees during the Christmas Season.

The commercial Christmas tree business began with two ox-sled loads of firs sold in New York City in the 1850's. Nationally, today about thirty million real Christmas trees are used for Christmas annually. They are grown on farms in every state, including Florida and in Canada.

Some people worry about all those trees that are cut each year but according to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), "Christmas tree har-

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December Garden Tips

Flowers

- There is still time to plant cool season flowers including: carnations, digitalis (foxglove), pansy, petunia, Shasta daisy, snapdragon.
- Prepare sensitive plants for freezes.
- Take a few cuttings from Pentas, Ixora, heather and other cold-sensitive perennials. These can be rooted, potted and held until spring as “insurance” in case extreme cold kills the parent plant.
- If the area receives cold temperatures and plants freeze, do not prune out damaged wood until spring.

Trees and Shrubs

- Last call for planting bare-root trees and shrubs.
- Resist the urge to fertilize outdoor plants.
- Collect and stick hardwood cuttings now. Good candidates for rooting by this method include: privet, Forsythia, Wisteria, honeysuckle, crape myrtle, althea, fig, quince, grape and Hibiscus.
- There still is time to apply a spray of horticultural oil to shrubs for the control of overwintering scales and mites. Avoid application during periods when extreme temperatures are expected.
- This is a good time to transplant trees and shrubs.

Fruits and Nuts

- Apply a spray of horticultural oil emulsion to dormant fruit trees.
- Harvest pecans early in order to insure good quality. Nut quality decreases rapidly if they are allowed to lie on wet ground for several days. Store them in a clean, dry place.
- Locate or order fruit trees for planting this winter.
- Remove sucker growth below the graft of citrus.

Vegetables

- Vegetables that can be established this month include beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, Chinese cabbage, kale, kohlrabi, leek, mustard, onions, parsley and radish.
- Locate sources for Irish potato and English pea seed. They can be started early in the year.

Lawns

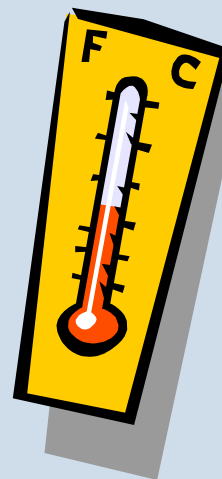
- Begin mowing the “over seeded” lawn as soon as it is tall enough to be clipped.
- Check soil moisture during the winter and water as needed.

Protect Plants from Cold

Coverings protect more from frost than from extreme cold. Covers that extend to the ground and are not in contact with plant foliage can lessen cold injury by reducing radiant heat loss from the plant and the ground. Foliage in contact with the cover is often injured because of heat transfer from the foliage to the colder cover. Some examples of coverings are: cloth sheets, quilts or black plastic. It is necessary to remove plastic covers during a sunny day or provide ventilation of trapped solar radiation.

In case of a severe freeze, place an electric light bulb inside the covering. This will provide necessary heat to keep a plant from freezing.

Plants in containers can be moved into protective structures where heat can be supplied and/or trapped. Containers that must be left outdoors should be protected by mulches and pushed together before a freeze to reduce heat loss from container sidewalls. Leaves of large canopy plants may be damaged if crowded together for extended periods.



Holiday Greenery Doesn't Come with Warning Labels

Recent concerns about lead in artificial greenery have many holiday decorators turning back to nature. But be careful what you grab, a University of Georgia expert says.

"Many people worry about accidentally bringing poisonous leaves in the house during the holiday season," said UGA Cooperative Extension horticulturist Paul Thomas. "That's not the item they should worry about the most."

The real problem is not the leaves on the holiday wreath but the vines that make up the base of the wreath and any berries used to decorate it.

"It's becoming popular to make your own wreaths by going out to the woods and getting grape and kudzu vines to make the basic form," Thomas said. "They do make great wreath framing. But when people are pulling down vines from a tree, they often make the mistake of grabbing poison ivy vines and mixing them in the wreath."

Most people looking for decorative vines are looking for ones that are the width of a finger and become bendable when soaked in warm water.

"Middle sections of poison ivy vine fit that description," Thomas said. "The only way to tell which vines are poison ivy is to look at the base of the vine. If the vine looks 'hairy' or has hundreds of tiny, root-like things attaching to the tree or rock, leave it alone!"

Grape vines have long, flaky bark and may have remnants of a single tendril every so often. Woody kudzu vines are smooth all the way to the base.

Left outside, where the oils are inert, poison ivy vines can be relatively harmless. "But when they get inside and get warm," Thomas said, "the oil can volatilize or be released from the vines. That's when everyone in the home gets poison ivy."

The best way to tell the difference, he said, is to get a good botanical book. Study how the vines look in your area. Make sure you can tell the difference. Many Web sites have images that can help

you identify woody vines.

Thomas says 99.9 percent of plants in holiday decorations aren't deadly. But you still need to be cautious if you have kids or pets. A good rule is that if the berry is fleshy and soft, like a grape, remove it. If it's hard or very firm, keep it.

"Mistletoe berries (which are fleshy and soft) are deadly, but can simply be removed before bringing the greenery indoors," he said. "Holly, yew and juniper berries can make you very ill if you eat a great many. However, the taste is so unappealing that this rarely happens. One berry or two won't harm people or pets."

But nobody would want to risk a sick child or pet during the holidays. So Thomas recommends placing any greenery with berries up out of reach of children.

"If you have a wreath on a door or greenery on the mantel, you should be fine," he said.

Keep an eye out for berries that happen to fall onto the floor. They can be irresistible to small children. Dogs and cats usually leave the berries alone.

Dried greenery can be a fire hazard.

"All plant material, once it dries out, is flammable," Thomas warned. "Christmas tree boughs are the most flammable. Com-

mon sense dictates that we don't place candles in arrangements of dried woodland materials."

Keep pine branches wet and use them just before your holiday events, for the same reason you cut Christmas trees fresh and provide water to your tree. There are products you can spray on the leaves and stems to make them less flammable.

"It takes about 10 days for untreated woodland materials to dry out. Hopefully, by then, the holiday season's over and you can make them into compost," Thomas said.

—by Faith Peppers,, University of Georgia, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences



Upcoming Events

Every Tuesday: *Plant Diagnostic Clinic.* This free clinic is open to the public from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Tuesdays at the South Santa Rosa Service Center at 5819 Gulf Breeze Pkwy.

December 9 & 10, 2006: *Pensacola Camellia Club 68th Annual Camellia Show.* The Wright Place, 80 E. Wright St.

December 25 and 26, 2006: Extension Office Closed

January 1, 2007: Extension Office Closed

January 19, 2007: Florida Arbor Day

For persons with disabilities requiring special accommodations, please contact the SRC Extension Office at least 5 working days prior to the program so that proper consideration may be given to the request.
(850) 623-3868

Pansy Growing at a Glance

The pansy is one of our best winter annual flowers. It is extremely cold tolerant, able to withstand hard freezes and recover completely. A well established and maintained pansy bed provides color throughout the winter and into late spring.

There are now many pansy colors from which to choose including white, red, purple and orange. Both solid colors, often called "clear faced" pansies, and those with blotches, known as "faced" pansies, are available. There are also two-tones and pastels, as well as those cultivars having flowers with crinkled or ruffled edges.

To enjoy season-long color, follow these tips:

- Prepare beds, purchase and establish plants in a bright, sunny location.
- Pansy plants are available in a wide range of container sizes from small cell packs to 3 and 4 inch pots. Those in larger pots usually have better developed root systems and provide more immediate effect than smaller plants.
- Bed preparation includes the addition and incorporation of organic materials such as peat, compost or manures. Make certain that the amendment has been fully decomposed prior to using it.
- Obtain the best effect from pansies by planting for mass effect. Though they can be spaced from 6 to 12 inches apart, 8 to 10 inches apart is most often recommended. Extremely close spacing can bring on pest problems, while extra wide spacings

reduce the mass effect.

- Set plants so that the top of the root ball is even with the top of the surrounding soil. Avoid excessively deep planting as this can result in root and stem rot problems.
- Mulch the soil surface with pine bark, pine needles or similar material as soon as planting is completed. Apply the mulch carefully in order to prevent covering of the foliage.
- Water thoroughly, settling the soil around the root system of the new plants. Watering will be required throughout the season, but space irrigation applications to avoid boggy or constantly wet conditions.
- Supplemental fertilization will be required, but avoid the use of fertilizers with high rates of ammoniacal nitrogen. This form of nitrogen is slow to be taken up when the soil is cold. Instead, a soluble fertilizer such as 20-10-20 containing nitrate nitrogen can be used at transplanting and periodically throughout the winter. As the soil warms up next spring, use a slow release fertilizer or reduce the amount of nitrogen being applied in order to prevent excessive growth.
- Remove old, spent blossoms and dead leaves on a regular basis. This practice encourages continuous growth and flowering, while reducing the incidence of disease.

—by Dan Mullins, Extension Faculty, Santa Rosa County

Questions and Answers

Q: I've noticed some of the soil I saved after repotting my houseplants feels hard now. Does it go bad?

A: Your soil is not bad, it's just dry. Most likely, it is high in organic matter and was once moist and pliable. During storage, the organic matter dried. The soil should be crushed a little and moistened before it's reused.

Q: I removed a crape myrtle from my yard, and new shoots are popping up all over the place. What can I treat the roots with to eliminate the growths?

A: Most crape myrtles are prolific producers of shoots from severed roots. Digging around plants and damaging the roots could result in a barrage of new shoots. Most form vigorous plants with healthy root systems that can be lifted to add to other areas of the landscape or shared with friends.

When the plants are out of control and not connected to an established plant you want to save, the best control is a brush killer found at local garden centers. These can be used as spot treatments for the shoots as they pop up from the ground. Many also have instructions on how to eliminate shoots and roots by painting cut ends with the products.

Q: Some of the branches were broken on my newly planted magnolia and oak trees. Is there any reason not to apply a pruning sealer?

A: Pruning paints lost favor about 30 years ago and are no longer recommended treatments for cuts or scrapes with trees and shrubs. The research is conclusive that the use of a sealer or paint can impede wound response and should be avoided.

Ensure quick "healing" by making good clean cuts. Avoid trimming the limbs back flush with trunks or limbs. Leave a little of the limb protruding, commonly called the branch collar. After this, the tree has to do the rest. If given normal care of adequate water and maybe a little fertilizer, the tree

can start to mend.

Q: We gathered seeds from a magnolia pod. What is the best way to plant them to ensure germination?

A: Simulate a little winter weather to have your magnolia seeds sprouting in a few months. First, remove the red seed coating and then sow the seeds in 4-inch or larger containers. Place one or two seeds in each container filled with a potting mix and thoroughly moisten.

When the seeds are planted, it's time to give them a wintertime experience in the refrigerator to help encourage growth. Allow your seeded containers to remain in the refrigerator for 120 days. Check the containers frequently to make sure the soil remains moist. After the cold treatment is over, place the containers in a warm, sunny spot, where the seeds should begin growth in about a month.

Q: I recently moved into a house with a gardenia bush that is growing out of control. When is the best time of the year to prune the bush? Will it bloom better after it's trimmed?

A: Fragrant white gardenia blooms are in your future, but only if you withhold major pruning until after flowering. The plants are maturing their summer and fall growths at this time and soon should be forming buds that develop into new blooms.

If needed, you could remove some out-of-bounds shoots that might be blocking walkways or causing the plants to be top-heavy. Otherwise, wait until summer to reshape and thin the plantings. When pruned at the proper time, you can expect more flowers.



Christmas Trees

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vesting does not upset the ecology." More than eighty-five million trees were planted this spring by Christmas tree growers to replace the thirty million trees that will be harvested this year. The rule of thumb is to plant two to three trees for every tree cut.

FDACS also points out that purchasing a Florida grown tree requires less fuel for transportation, supports the farmers of the state and boosts Florida's economy.

An acre of Christmas trees produces enough oxygen to meet the daily oxygen requirements of eighteen people. There are approximately 500,000 acres of Christmas trees grown nationally. Eighty percent of artificial trees are manufactured in China. It is estimated that three times as many real Christmas trees will be purchased in 2005 as compared to fake or artificial trees

—by Larry Williams, Extension Faculty, Okaloosa County



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