

Choose and cut facilities make selecting Christmas tree fun

UNIVERSITY PARK — Selecting your Christmas tree puts you and your whole family into the holiday spirit. Or does it? Searching among the crowds of people and finding the perfect tree among the dozens of trees seems impossible. One is too short, another is poorly shaped and they are all too expensive. If buying your tree puts you in a scrooge-like mood, Jim Finley, forest resources Extension specialist at the Pennsylvania State University, has some suggestion for you.

For convenience, you can go to a retail outlet in your town. But why not make the experience an enjoyable family outing? Go to a "choose and cut" facility where the whole family can walk through

the fields and help to select a tree. This will ensure a fresh tree that will often cost less than those at retail outlets. Some operations in the state even offer picnic facilities or have hayrides that take families to the tree lot.

"If your family has an enjoyable day, then included in the price of the tree is entertainment," Finley says.

He also points out that the grower's risks and investments must be considered in the price of a Christmas tree. To produce a seven-foot Blue Spruce tree takes 10 to 15 years. A Scotch Pine takes seven to 10 years. During this time, disease and small animals such as moles or insects, may cause severe losses.

The grower has expenses in land, seedlings and herbicides. Shearing the trees usually begins in the third year after planting and must continue for four to 12 years. Because nature does not produce perfect trees, shearing is necessary so that the tree will have a shape desirable to the consumer. The grower's single market is Christmas trees; therefore, producers make money just once a year.

Finley adds that the Pennsylvania Christmas Tree Growers Association has a "Choose and Cut List" of places that offer these facilities. You can write to them at R.D.1, Box 247, Ziegler Road, Dover, PA 17315 for your copy.

Prepare holiday meals safely

WEST CHESTER — As you work in the kitchen during the holiday season, remember to use caution when preparing those holiday goodies. Here are some tips to keep in mind from J. Lynne Brown, Penn State Extension assistant professor of human nutrition.

To refrigerate foods properly, your refrigerator should register at 40 degrees F. or lower. The best way to thaw meat and poultry is to do this in the refrigerator. For faster thawing, put the frozen food in a watertight plastic bag in cold water. Change the water often and monitor the thawing process so the meat does not sit at room temperature unnecessarily.

If roast turkey is included in your holiday menu, remember to first wash the inside and outside of the bird with cold water and rinse well. Wash your hands, utensils and the sink well after they have come in contact with the raw turkey.

If you wish to stuff the turkey, allow 3/4 cup of stuffing for each pound of turkey and stuff the bird right before it's ready to go in the oven. The temperature of the turkey should reach 185 degrees F. in the inner thigh of a whole bird before its declared "done." Stuffing temperature should reach at least 165 degrees F. Remove all

stuffing as soon as the bird is cooked.

If you serve fresh pork, it should be cooked to an internal temperature of 170 degrees F. Cured hams should be heated to 160 degrees F.

Hot foods should reach a temperature of 165-212 degrees F. If you delay serving these foods, they should be kept at 140-165 degrees F. to prevent growth of harmful bacteria. Never leave hot food out for more than two hours.

Store leftovers immediately. Do not let them cool on the kitchen counter. Refrigerate food in shallow containers so food is in thin layers, about 2 1/2 inches deep. This gives maximum circulation to cool the food faster and permits less bacteria growth.

Leftover casseroles and soups should keep up a maximum of a week if your refrigerator works well. Leftovers are best used within two to three days or should be divided into smaller containers and frozen for later use.

When reheating leftovers, cook soups and gravies to boiling. The food should be heated enough so that it is too hot to put in your mouth immediately.

You can often tell if food is spoiled by its odor. If you have any doubt, throw it away.

Living plants make good Christmas gifts

NEWARK, Del. — A beautiful living plant is a wonderful way to express the spirit of the holiday season—a pleasure to give and a pleasure to receive. So why not consider an appropriate one for a friend or loved one?

University of Delaware extension garden specialist Dave Tatnall offers these suggestions for buying a gift plant.

Make sure the plant is healthy, well-shaped and of suitable size. Flowers should be abundant and, preferably, just beginning to open. Foliage should be clean, of good color and free of pests.

Choose the type of plant you feel will flower most dependably in its future home. A favorable location and proper care will lengthen the blooming period and keep the plant looking attractive.

"Your choice may depend on whether the plant will be discarded after flowering or kept indefinitely," Tatnall says. But he points out that only a few Christmas plants make satisfactory long term house or garden plants. His personal favorites include the poinsettia, Christmas cactus, and cyclamen. Of these, only the Christmas cactus makes a good permanent plant.

"Choose your gift plant early, while the selection is good," Tatnall advises. "This often means two or three weeks before Christmas. If you're buying from a florist or garden center, ask to have the plant tagged and set aside for you. That way it will benefit from professional care until it goes to its new home."

While flowering plants are by far the most popular for Christmas giving, a foliage plant can sometimes be a better choice. One of the best is the Norfolk Island pine. This slow-growing needled evergreen, with its distinctive whorled growth, does well under average indoor conditions. It is sometimes used as a Christmas tree substitute and should be available at most local plant shops.

"If you would rather give a landscape plant," the specialist says, "order it now from a mail order nursery that offers this service. The company will send the person you designate a card at Christmastime, announcing that the plant has been reserved and will be delivered at the proper planting time in the spring."



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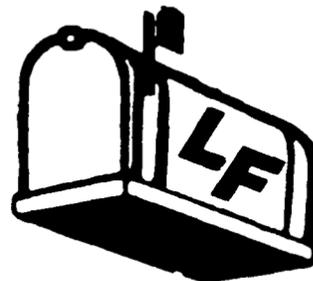
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