

Legend Of The Christmas Tree

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In the next few weeks, four out of five families will travel as far as ten miles from their home to buy a fresh evergreen for their Christmas celebration, according to a Penn State University study. The most critical requirements for the discriminating tree buyer will be that the evergreen have a straight trunk, pleasant fragrance and a attractive symmetry.

But according to the study, nearly half of the buyers will have no idea what type of tree they've purchased.

The buyers will, however, be continuing a mid-winter tradition which some historians say dates back as far as the ancient Egyptians.

Approximately 1,600 Christmas tree growers in Pennsylvania harvest about 1,500,000 trees each year. Many of the Pennsylvania trees are sold at retail lots, but a substantial number are also sold wholesale, and end up as the center of holiday festivities in states from New England to Florida.

Even though Pennsylvania is known as the "Christmas Tree State," several other states are major producers, including Oregon, Michigan, Wisconsin, California, North Carolina and Washington. In the early days most Pennsylvania-grown trees were scotch pines, but today the state also produces high quality Douglas, concolor and Fraser firs, blue spruce and white pines.

In the five to 16 years needed to grow a mature Christmas tree, the evergreen faces many hazards. During the summer of 1988, many Pennsylvania trees were stunted or killed by the drought and extremely hot weather. In the summer of 1989 gypsy moths infested some species of pines. Insects and diseases can also be a problem.

Each summer the trees are sheared. The careful pruning can hold back rapid upward growth and encourage the trees to fill out. Holes in a tree can be corrected by clipping a limb, causing a fork to form with two or more branches where there was only one before.

In 1988, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Christmas trees had a wholesale value of about \$680 million, putting the tree industry ahead of several other traditional agricultural commodities in terms of cash receipts, such as oat production (\$200 million in 1987), rice (\$500 million), and sheep and lambs (\$600 million).

Perhaps more than any other, Christmas is a holiday steeped in tradition. It should not be surprising the season's main decoration has a long tradition as well.

According to the National Christmas Tree Association, there are legends of decorated trees in winter celebrations long before there was a Christmas.

"Egyptians brought palm branches into their homes in late December as a symbol of growing things," states a National Christmas Tree Association pamphlet. "Romans trimmed trees with trinkets and topped them with an image of their sun god to celebrate Saturnalia. Druid sorcerers hung golden apples and lit candles on oak trees to celebrate the winter solstice. In the middle ages, the feast of Adam and Eve was held on Dec. 24; a fir tree hung with red apples called the Paradise tree was its symbol."

The use of an evergreen as part of the Christian Christmas celeb-



A family trip to select a live, Christmas tree is the highlight of the holiday season.

ration is generally believed to have started 400 years ago in Germany and spread to most of northern Europe by the 19th century. The custom reached the United States with Hessian mercenaries who came to the colonies during the Revolutionary War.

The first recorded Christmas tree retail lot, according to the National Association, was set up in 1851 by Pennsylvanian Mark Carr, who transported two ox sleds of trees from the Catskill Mountains to the sidewalks of New York City.

In the 1850s, Franklin Pierce was the first president to set up a Christmas tree in the White House. But it was Calvin Coolidge in 1923 who established the National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony on the White House lawn.

When Theodore Roosevelt, an ardent conservationist, was elected president, he decreed there would be no Christmas tree in the White House, because he feared at the rate trees were being cut, America's spruce forests were being endangered. But today, Christmas tree growers consider trees as a harvested crop that is replaced with seedlings.

Berkey's Nursery, a Pennsylvania tree grower from Spartansburg, will supply the official White House tree for Christmas 1989, according to the Pennsylvania Christmas Tree Growers Association.

Originally the family's Christmas tree was cut from a forest, but in recent years most Christmas trees have been harvested from plantations where they started out as seedlings in neat rows. But a trend has been developing among many growers to open their fields to customers who want to choose and cut their own holiday tree.

Another trend in some areas is the purchase of two or more trees per family. The second tree is sometimes decorated for a child's room or the family recreation room.

Most consumers will be looking for a six-to-eight-foot tree, which may be five to 16 years old.

It takes a special type of farmer, an especially patient farmer, to manage a tree plantation, nurturing and caring for a crop which cannot be harvested for six to 10 years after it is planted. An entire field is not harvested at the same time; it may take three or four years to clear-cut a field.

But it is a crop which can pro-

vide a significant contribution to an area's economy. Indiana County tree grower Roy Fleming provided this example of Christmas tree economics.

Scotch pine seeds which cost \$100 per pound may grow 20,000 seedlings. The plantation owner plants, mows, shears and sprays the seedlings many times in the years they are maturing.

If the grower can sell 60 percent of his trees for \$10 each, he will have brought \$120,000 in new money into his county.

Even though more and more consumers are buying their trees at "cut your own" plantations, most will still be buying their evergreen at a retail lot. And since freshness is a main concern for many tree buyers, the National Christmas Tree Association offers these tips on how to pick a fresh tree, and how to keep it fresh.

Check the condition of the needles by placing a needle between your thumb for forefinger. Bring your fingers together. When bent gently the needle from a fresh tree should bend rather than break.

As a second test for freshness, lift the tree a few inches off the ground and drop it on the stump end. If outside green needles fall off in abundance, the tree may not be fresh.

After the tree is cut and until you are ready to decorate it, keep the tree outdoors, but protected from the wind and sun, keep the trunk in water. Trees may "drink" between two pints and one gallon of water per day.

If the water level drops below the fresh cut, a seal may form on the stump, and a new cut may be necessary to allow the tree to absorb more water.

If possible, bring the tree into a partially heated area such as basement or garage the night before it is decorated, to help the tree gradually adjust to warmer temperatures.

Unfortunately, most trees are unceremoniously discarded after the holiday is over. But the Pennsylvania Christmas Tree Association also has some ideas for recycling your tree.

Place the tree in the garden or backyard and use it as a bird feeder. Orange slices and other goodies will attract birds, which can also find shelter in the spruce branches.

Since it is biodegradable, Christmas tree branches may be

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