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Well I have been busting it over Thanksgiving trying to get my house decorated for Christmas. I usually leisurely decorated but this year TV is coming Monday to tape our Christmas special. Even though it is a lot of work, I love it and it really gets me in the holiday spirit. Some of the new things I did this year are: Carved a 7 foot tall Nutcracker out of a pine log and put an electric train with a stone bridge circling 15 feet high in my living room. I truly love using natural and homemade things for decorating.

Pine cones have endless décor capabilities. Singularly or in groups, natural, bleached or painted, hanging or on surfaces they bring the outside in. Gold, silver, or red pinecones can highlight any tree. Most gardeners hate Sweetgum balls but cluster a few, add a little paint and presto a beautiful ornament. Holly, nandina and pyrcantha berries add splashes of color. Crepe myrtle seeds can be painted if other berries are scarce. Don't forget the green. Holly, magnolia and conifer foliage make excellent wreaths, swags and center pieces. Truly the ideas are endless.

One of my fondest memories of my youth was searching the woods for that perfect cedar tree. One of the simple back to nature joys of Christmas is the pleasant fragrance and genuine beauty of a live Christmas tree. However, as with many time honored traditions it isn't easy to select and maintain a live Christmas tree. If you still have the real tree, put me on your party invitation list.

To check a tree that has already been cut, grasp a branch between your thumb and forefinger and pull toward you. Very few needles will come off if the tree is fresh. Next, take a few needles and bend them. If they spring back, the tree is fresh. Be sure to look at the trunk. If you can see splits in the trunk, the tree most likely will have dried to a point where it will not take up water. Now, bump the trunk of the tree on the ground. If green needles fall off the tree, it is not fresh. You can expect a few brown needles to fall from the tree. Choose another tree if many brown needles fall off.

Trees that are growing in a field will be fresh and full of water. Select a tree that will fit your stand and into your house. Then gently shake the tree to see if any green needles fall. After that, break a few needles and check for fragrance. Pines, firs and Leyland Cypress will stay fresh longer than other trees. Cedars, spruces and cultivars of Arizona cypress stay fresh for a shorter period of time.

To learn more about decorating, gardening and country living watch both of our Emmy Award winning T.V. programs, Making-It-Grow (MIG) and Down Home with Tony and Amanda. MIG can be seen at 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday nights on regular ETV. However, at present Down Home can only be seen on digital cable and some satellite systems on the SC Channel (channel 802 on Time Warner Cable).

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