Living Christmas Trees

Balled-and-burlapped or container-grown Christmas trees can be planted out as landscape trees after Christmas. This way of enjoying a Christmas tree is practical in South Carolina, where the mild late-December or early-January weather is ideal for tree planting. With care and planning, your Christmas tree will serve as a living memory for many years.

Planning Ahead

There are a number of different things to consider when planning to use a living Christmas tree indoors.

- Living trees can stay in the house for only a brief period, no more than 7 to 10 days. Longer periods in a home can lead to death of the tree.
- Make sure that the tree will fit into your landscape. Most trees used as Christmas trees will eventually reach heights of 40 to 60 feet.
- Select a species that is well-suited to growing in your area. The tree will be inside for a very short time compared to the time that you will have it in your landscape.
- Living trees are very heavy. They will be even heavier, since it is necessary to keep the roots constantly moist. Be sure that you can manage to move this much weight around without damaging either the tree or yourself. Container-grown trees are usually lighter and easier to handle.

Types of Living Trees

Some evergreens that will thrive throughout the state are Virginia pine, Eastern red cedar and other junipers, Leyland cypress, and varieties of Arizona cypress such as ‘Clemson Greenspire’ and ‘Carolina Sapphire.’ Some unusual choices that will grow throughout the state include the Japanese cedar (Cryptomeria japonica) and deodar cedar. White pine and spruces will grow in the upper Piedmont and mountains.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Name (Botanical Name)</th>
<th>Mature Size</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Growing Conditions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Red Cedar (Juniperus virginiana)</td>
<td>20 to 50 feet high and 8 to 15 feet wide.</td>
<td>Narrow, dense and compact with scale-like needles. The foliage color varies from dark green to gray-green to bronze, depending on cultivar. The wood and foliage are very aromatic.</td>
<td>Full sun and good drainage. Tolerates drought and poor soil. Grows throughout South Carolina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Red Cedar (J. silicicola)</td>
<td>20 to 50 feet high and 8 to 20 feet wide.</td>
<td>Very similar to Eastern red cedar, but often more open and wide-spreading.</td>
<td>Excellent for coastal region, because of salt tolerance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Carolina Sapphire’ Cypress (Cupressus arizonica)</td>
<td>20 to 30 feet tall, 8 feet wide. Rapid growth rate while young.</td>
<td>Dense, finely textured, steel blue, scale-like foliage.</td>
<td>Full sun; well-drained soil. Thrives in hot and dry conditions. Will grow throughout South Carolina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Clemson Greenspire’ Cypress (Cupressus arizonica)</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>Dense, finely textured, grass green scale like foliage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virginia Pine (Pinus virginiana)</td>
<td>60 to 65 feet tall and 10 to 30 feet wide.</td>
<td>This is a short-needled pine with dense foliage artistically spiraled. Foliage is yellow-green to dark green.</td>
<td>Tolerates poor, dry, heavy clay soils where other pines will not grow. Full sun.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern White Pine (Pinus strobus)</td>
<td>50 to 100 feet in height and 20 to 40 feet in spread. Rapid growth, growing more than 2 feet per year.</td>
<td>White pine needles are delicate, soft, and light bluish-green. White pine is easily recognized because it is the only commonly grown five-needled pine.</td>
<td>It grows best on fertile, moist, well-drained soil and in full sun. Will tolerate partial shade. White pine can be grown in the upper Piedmont and mountains of South Carolina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leyland Cypress (x Cupressocyparis leylandii)</td>
<td>60 to 70 feet tall and 12 to 20 feet wide. Grows rapidly when young.</td>
<td>Graceful pyramid, with dense branches and fine, feathery foliage that varies in color from dark green to grayish blue-green.</td>
<td>Sun to part shade and well-drained fertile soil. Will grow throughout South Carolina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norway Spruce (Picea abies)</td>
<td>40 to 60 feet tall and 25 to 30 feet wide. Medium to fast growth rate.</td>
<td>Pyramidal form with deep green foliage. The branches droop at the ends with age.</td>
<td>Full sun. Rich, moist, well-drained soil. Upper Piedmont and mountains of South Carolina only.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colorado Blue Spruce (Picea pungens)</td>
<td>30 to 60 feet tall and 10 to 20 feet wide. Slow to medium growth rate.</td>
<td>Dense, very regular shaped, green to blue-green to silvery blue evergreen. The foliage color varies from tree to tree. Some cultivars are chosen for their superior color.</td>
<td>Full sun is essential. Rich, moist, well-drained soil. Upper Piedmont and mountains of South Carolina only.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deodar Cedar (Cedrus deodara)</td>
<td>40 to 70 feet tall and 40 to 70 feet wide after 30 to 40 years.</td>
<td>Very large, graceful trees with short blue-green needles on woody branches that droop at the tips.</td>
<td>Sun, well-drained soil. Grows throughout South Carolina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Japanese Cedar (Cryptomeria japonica)</td>
<td>50 to 80 feet tall and 20 to 30 feet wide.</td>
<td>Pyramidal when young. Drooping branches are covered with spirally arranged, glossy, dark green needles. The foliage of many types turns bronze in winter. ‘Yoshino’ has bright green winter color.</td>
<td>Moist, acidic, well-drained soil. Prefers full sun, tolerates partial shade. Grows throughout South Carolina.</td>
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</tbody>
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**Selecting a Healthy Tree**

Living Christmas trees can be purchased at many nurseries and garden centers and at some retail lots and choose-and-cut farms. Choose your tree early before for the best selection. You can store the tree in your yard until ready to bring inside, if you keep it moist, with the root ball covered with mulch.

Look for trees with healthy, well-colored needles. Avoid those that show brown tips, are yellowing or shedding. Container-grown trees should not be rootbound. Check to see that the root ball of a balled-and-burlapped tree is firm. Trees with loose or pancaked root balls are unlikely to survive. After purchase, be especially careful to avoid injury to the
tree’s root system. Do not carry the tree by its trunk or drop the tree on its root ball.

Care of the Tree in the Home

The high temperatures and low humidity levels in houses are stressful to trees. Follow these tips to give your tree the best care and help ensure success.

- Before moving the tree inside the house, help it adjust by moving it to an unheated but sheltered area such as a garage or porch for a couple of days.
- Keep the tree in the house for no more than 7 to 10 days.
- Locate the tree indoors in as cool a location as possible. Keep it away from heating vents, fireplaces and other heat sources. Use limited numbers of miniature tree lights.
- Provide as much natural light as possible.
- Place the root ball or container in a water holding tub. Fill the bottom two inches of the tub with gravel and place the ball or container on the gravel. This will keep the tree from sitting in water.
- Keep the root ball constantly and evenly moist, but not flooded. A handy technique for watering trees while indoors is to place crushed ice over the top of the root ball.
- A piece of pipe inserted vertically at the side of the tub provides an easy way to check water level in the tub. If there is water at the bottom of the pipe, you do not need to water the tree. You can check the water level by inserting a "dip stick" into the pipe.

Planting & Care

After the holidays, readjust the tree to outdoor temperatures by placing it back on the sheltered porch or in the garage for several days. It is important to plant your tree as soon as possible after the holidays. Do not wait until spring.

Select a planting site that has well-drained soil, full sun and that is appropriate for the mature tree’s size.

Plant your tree in a hole that is the same depth but at least twice and preferably five times wider than the root ball. Be sure not to plant the tree too deeply.

Remove synthetic burlap completely since it can cause root girdling. Remove natural burlap from the top of the root ball, to avoid drying out the root ball.

Remove containers from container-grown trees and cut and loosen any encircling roots.

Remove at least the top portion of wire tree baskets after the root ball is in the planting hole. Fill the hole around the freshly set tree with the loosened, unamended soil from the planting hole. Backfill around the root ball in stages, gently firming in each layer of soil. Water well to settle the soil and eliminate air pockets. Apply 2 or 3 inches of mulch on top of the root ball. It is not necessary to fertilize until spring.

For further information, see the fact sheet HGIC 1001, Planting Trees.

Some Alternatives

If the work of bringing a live tree in and out of the house seems excessive, consider planting the tree directly outside and decorating it there. This can become an enjoyable occasion that is less stressful on both you and the tree.

If you do not have space in your own yard for a living tree, you may be able to donate it to a local school, church or park. Be sure that there are such options in your area ahead of time.

Norfolk Island pine is a pine-like houseplant that you can use as a Christmas tree for many years. Norfolk Island pines must have evenly bright light that reaches all the branches to maintain good form. Plants that do not get enough light become leggy and misshapen. The soil should be kept evenly moist, but the plant must never sit in water. Norfolk Island pines prefer cool to medium temperatures of 50 to 70 °F during the day and 45 to 65 °F at night.

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