

The Gardener's Dirt

JOHNSTON COUNTY CENTER

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Feature

Selection and Care of a Christmas Tree

Deborah Crandall, Master Gardener

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We all enjoy the pleasant fragrance and genuine beauty of a live Christmas tree. The following 5 steps are to make sure you get the maximum enjoyment from your live Christmas tree during this year's holiday season.

1) *Choosing a Precut Tree*

Before setting out to purchase a tree, determine where in the home the tree will be located, the size required and whether all sides will be displayed. Other characteristics such as tree density, color and fragrance should also be considered. Next, determine whether a cut tree or "balled and burlapped" is to be purchased, or if a visit to a "choose and cut" farm is preferred.

In North Carolina, there are a number of native-grown trees available for purchase, including Fraser fir, White pine, Virginia pine,

red cedar, Leyland cypress and others. Fraser fir has all the qualities of an excellent Christmas tree, such as fragrance, good needle retention and freshness. Its strong limbs will also hold ornaments well.



Fraser Fir
Photo courtesy of D. Crandall

White pine is a softer-textured tree with more pliable limbs than those of Fraser fir. Its needles are somewhat longer than most other

Christmas tree species and retains its needles well.



White Pine
Photo courtesy of D. Crandall

Virginia pine is often sold from “choose and cut” farms and has the good qualities of the pines such as fragrance, needle retention and suitability for ornaments.

Leland cypress is a relative newcomer in the Christmas tree market. It has a lighter green color than red cedar and has soft flexible limbs. It also has a very attractive shape. Like red cedar, Leyland cypress dries rapidly in a warm house.

2) Choosing a Field-Grown Tree

Trees still connected to their roots will be fresh and full of water. Select a tree that will fit your stand. Then gently shake the tree to see if any green needles fall.

Fraser firs, pines, and Leyland cypress will stay fresh longer than other trees. Cedars and cultivars of Arizona cypress stay fresh for a shorter period of time.

The directories of growers can be found online linked with the NC Eastern Christmas Tree Growers Association website,

www.nc-chooseandcut.com as well as the NC Department of Agriculture’s NC Farm Fresh website, <http://www.ncfarmfresh.com>.

3) Before Bringing the Tree Inside

If your tree has been cut for more than one hour, recut at least one inch from the trunk and place the tree in plain water immediately. If you are not going to take the tree inside until later, store the tree out of the wind and sun in an unheated sheltered area such as a garage or porch.

4) Once Your Tree is Inside

Once your tree is inside, you can care for it by placing it in a stable container that will hold at least 2 gallons of water. Check the water level each day. A fresh tree may use more than a gallon of water a day.

Because heat will dry your tree out, you should follow these timely fire safety tips:

- Keep metal foil and tinsel away from electrical sockets.
- Keep the tree away from heat sources such as hot air ducts, radiators, and fireplaces.
- Always turn off your decorations before going to bed or leaving home.
- Make sure your smoke detector and fire extinguisher are in good working order.
- Never place candles or other open flame sources on or near your tree.

5) After the Christmas Season

After the Holiday Season, check your decorations and dispose of any electrical items that are showing wear. Pack your decorations carefully and store them in a cool dry place. The Christmas tree can then be recycled for mulch or composted. For more recycling options, go to: <http://pender.ces.ncsu.edu/2013/12/how-you-can-recycle-your-christmas-tree/>

FEATURE PLANT

Paperwhites

Narcissus papyraceus

Joanne King, Master Gardener

What a nice way to cheer you up on a gray winter day! *Narcissus papyraceus*, or paperwhites, is a perennial bulbous plant that is easy to grow. It is a type of daffodil enjoyed as a houseplant in the winter. Known for its fragrance, its white flowers appear in a bunch about 12 inches tall, lasting about 2-4 weeks. They bloom in 4-6 weeks, so you can plan for their bloom time.



Photo courtesy of www.wikipedia.org

To promote root growth, they need cool temperatures (50-65 °F) and indirect light. Move to a sunny location once they produce stems, and rotate the container a few times to keep them from reaching for sunlight. After blooming, move out of direct sunlight to prolong flower life. Watering is critical; too much or too little will cause them to fail.

To plant in water, you need a container with room for 2-4 inches of pebbles for support. Use a tall vase, about 10-12 inches high, like a hurricane style with a large opening so the stems have support. Place the bulbs, root side down, close together and almost

touching, and secure them with more stones. Add water to reach just under base of the bulbs.

To pot in soil, use a peat moss based soil mix. A bowl shaped container works best. If the planter has a drain hole, check for water frequently. Pre-moisten the soil until evenly moist but not soggy, and add a few inches to the container. Place bulbs root side down, close together, almost touching. Add more soil to support. Point the tips to the center to aid in support. Use a wire ring or bamboo and string to support the stems from toppling which can be positioned when you plant or later when the stems reach a height of 8 inches. Supporting stems is an important consideration.

For bulbs planted in water, Cornell University conducted research that offers a dilute alcohol solution instead of pure water, which inhibits growth but reduces flopping of the stems. Here is a link about this research. <http://blogs.cornell.edu/hort/2009/11/10/pickling-your-paperwhites/>

Quick Tip

Recycling Your Christmas Tree

Deborah Crandall, Master Gardener



Photo courtesy of Nebraska Extension, Lancaster County

Place the Christmas tree in the garden or backyard and use it as a bird feeder and sanctuary. Fresh orange slices and

cranberries can be strung to attract the birds. **Important: Never burn your Christmas tree in a fireplace or wood stove.**

More recycling tips at: <http://lancaster.unl.edu/hort/articles/2013/RecycleChristmas.shtml>

Good or Bad?

Leaves - Problem or Blessing?

Joanne King, Master Gardener

Oh, great! Another windy day and it's raining leaves!

When left to accumulate on lawns, leaves can be a problem. However, leaves used as mulch or a soil conditioner can be a blessing. They are rich in minerals and trace elements.

Regarding lawns, the bad news is:

- The leaf cover blocks the light that growing grass needs.
- It defeats the purpose of having a green lawn because it looks brown.
- Heavy leaf accumulation smothers the grass and makes it look pale and weak.
- If left in heavy layers, it can contribute to turf disease.



In the long run the good outweighs the bad. So, here's the good news.

- The leaves, which are rich in carbon once they turn brown, can be finely mulched with the mower along with the nitrogen-rich, green grass.
- The mulching aids in decomposition and returning nutrients to the lawn. Otherwise, the leaves can be removed from the lawn using your mower to bag them.
- Incorporate them into the garden and shrub beds, using them as mulch around shrubs.
- Stockpile them for use later in your compost pile or for spring mulching.

Finely mulched leaves are a soil conditioner. The finer, the better. The resulting product aids in water retention and soil aeration. When they first fall, leaves still have nitrogen, but as they age they become mostly a carbon component in the compost or flower/shrub bed. Be sure to do a soil test to determine if adjustments are necessary when you plant.

Lastly, an accumulation of leaves around shrubs, porches and other structures can create an environment for insects and critters. Some desirable, and others undesirable. Nothing is worse than cleaning up in the spring and encountering an ant nest, or finding a snake in a leaf pile under your porch.

Here's a good article on all aspects of recycling nature's leaf bounty: <http://www.planetnatural.com/leaf-mold/>

Be Creative, Grow Native

Spicebush

Lindera benzoin

Margy Pearl, Master Gardener

How many different kinds of butterflies can you see in North Carolina? According to the Butterflies and Moths of North America Projects at <http://www.butterfliesandmoths.org/>, there are 176! With the increased use of pesticides and loss of natural habitat, however, just growing plants that provide nectar for butterflies is not enough to help these fascinating insects survive and thrive. We can, and should, ensure that our gardens include host plants for their caterpillars, as well.

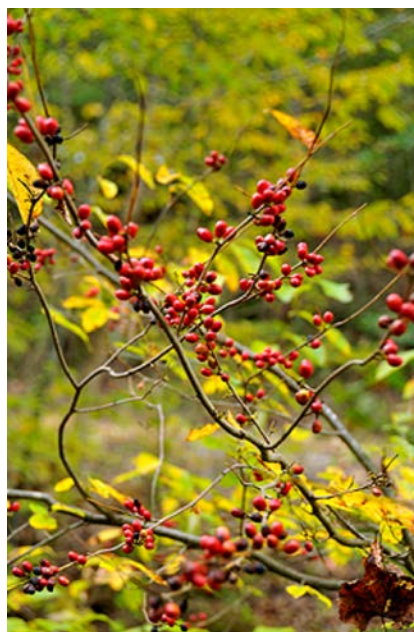
A few years ago, I made an effort to grow butterfly host plants, starting simply with several perennial bronze fennel, dill and parsley plants. To my delight and that of my grandson, over 40 black and yellow swallowtail caterpillars attended the “fennel buffet” that first year!

Most recently, I added two spicebushes, the host plant for the Eastern Tiger and Spicebush swallowtails. Two large eye-spots on the backs of the Spicebush swallowtail caterpillars uniquely protect them from predation by making them look like small lizards!



Photo courtesy of www.marietta.edu

An attractive deciduous shrub that grows 6 to 8 feet high and wide, the spicebush prefers full to partial sun and moist soil. Bright red fruit contrasted against golden-yellow autumn color make this an eye-popping fall plant!



<http://dendro.cnre.vt.edu/dendrology/syllabus/factsheet.cfm?ID=123>

Other great reasons to plant this outstanding native!

- Blooms late winter to early spring.
- Dense clusters of tiny, yellow flowers bloom before leaves emerge.
- Spicy scented flowers, foliage, and fruit.
- Named by National Audubon of North Carolina as one of the “Bird-Friendly Native Plants of the Year for 2015”. Attracts robins, bobwhite, mockingbirds, great crested flycatcher and other songbirds.
- Drought tolerant
- Low Maintenance.

Local Source: Taylor’s Nursery, Raleigh

<http://www.taylornursery.com/>

Incredible Edible

A Christmas Story

Brenda Clayton, Master Gardener

Everyone enjoys a love story, especially at Christmas. So I am going to tell you a true one.

We've always heard it said that the first holidays after a loved one's death are the hardest. My Dad passed away in July, 1987. We made it through Thanksgiving and now Christmas is looming ahead. This particular Sunday morning, Mother's heart was very heavy.

Inexplicably, she felt the urge to make a cake. Not just any cake, but this cake. It had been a Christmas special for a number of years and our family always enjoyed it immensely. But she needed a few ingredients from the grocery store, and Mother never shops on Sunday. The urge, however, would not go away. So off to the grocery store she goes on this Sunday morning.

Back home, she makes the cake and when it cools she goes to the pantry to find the Christmas tin she always places the cake in to keep it fresh and moist. Last year, Dad was there to help wash and put away the big round tin. Opening the tin Mother finds a sweet love note from Dad that he had placed in there the year before. The note was a balm to Mother's heavy heart, a sweet expression of his love for her, and a gentle reminder of his thoughtfulness.

That unexplainable urge? Only God knew that note was there. At some future point, she would have made the cake again, but

she needed Dad's comforting note right then.

So here I am 28 years later, still making this cake. Mother is 91 years old and the baking has been turned over to me. I made this cake last week so that I would have a photo to share. Please enjoy and pass the story along.



Photo courtesy of Brenda Clayton

Lemon-Nut Cake

2 c. butter
2 c. sugar
6 eggs
4 c. flour
1 tsp. baking powder
1 lb. white raisins
5 c. chopped pecans
1 2-oz. bottle lemon extract

Cream the butter and sugar in a mixing bowl. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Sift flour and baking powder together. Add the raisins and pecans and mix until coated. Add to the creamed mixture gradually. Add the lemon extract and stir well. Pour into a greased and floured tube pan. Bake at 300 degrees for 30 minutes. Reduce temperature to 275 degrees and bake for 1 hour longer.

DECEMBER GARDEN TASKS

LAWN CARE

- For cool season grasses, mow to 3 inches and remove leaves and other debris.
- Cool-season weeds in established dormant Zoysia or Bermuda grass lawns may be treated with broadleaf herbicides.
- NEVER burn off Centipede grass to remove excess debris.
- Selected herbicides (like atrazine or simazine) can be applied to control annual bluegrass and several annual broadleaf weeds.

GENERAL REMINDERS

- Prune evergreens to use for winter decorations in the house by cutting out unwanted limbs that would be pruned in February anyway. Save major pruning for late winter. Holly, Magnolia, Cedar, and Nandina foliage will last a long time.
- Prevent winter damage to plants from desiccation (drying out), freezing and thawing, and breakage from ice and snow loads. Keep plants watered during dry periods. Read *How to Protect Plants from Cold Damage* at <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-604.html>
- This is an excellent time to mulch shrubs, trees, perennials, and herbs for winter protection. Apply a layer 3" deep since most perennials are dormant and it's easy to get a wheelbarrow into the garden. Mulch comparisons and general info: <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-608.html>

- Put your cut Holiday tree to use! Cut the branches and lay them over perennials to protect them from the cold. Shred small branches to make mulch.
- Do NOT prune fruit trees now. Fruit trees are best pruned late winter just before they start to grow in spring.
- Asparagus crowns can be planted now through March.

WILDLIFE

- Clean bird feeders monthly with hot sudsy water and diluted bleach to prevent the spread of wild bird diseases. Keep seed hulls from accumulating underneath the feeder to discourage rodents.

COOL CONNECTIONS!



[NC Extension Gardener Manual](#)
[NCSU Publication Links](#)
[NC Extension Gardening Portal](#)
[NC Extension Plant Database](#)
[Going Native](#) (Selecting and Planting Native Plants)
[NCSU Pruning Trees and Shrubs](#)
[Past Issues of Gardeners Dirt](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

Become a Johnston Co Extension Master Gardener!

Calling for men and women who love to garden, would like to learn and share their knowledge, serve as a volunteer and have fun with other gardening enthusiasts! To learn more about Master Gardeners, go to <http://www.ncstategardening.org/> The training starts on Thursday January 28th, 2016. Classes will be held each Thursday afternoon from 1:30 to 4:30 for 13 weeks. Contact Marshall H. Warren for more information. Email him at mhwarren@ncsu.edu or call 919-989-5380. [Click here](#) to access the application. There will be a course fee of \$120 that will include an educational training manual and name tag.

Please make check payable to Johnston County Ag Center. The application and check are due by January 20th, 2016.

Mail to:
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NEWSLETTER EDITED BY: Brenda Clayton

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