



## **O Christmas Tree**

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

Some of my fondest memories around Christmas involve shopping for the annual Christmas tree. When I was a child, picking just the right live tree was my parents' task. For my first ten years I lived on a hillside that overlooked the town, and at the foot of the hill was a garden center that sold trees. From my bedroom window I could see the glow of Christmas decorations, and at the foot of the hill the lights of the garden center beckoned everyone to get their holiday decorations there.

They had a live manger complete, at least on one memorable occasion, with a nasty camel that liked to spit on people. I remember my mother's horror when it successfully landed one on her forehead. My mother was always dressed to the nines and well-groomed. This did not go over well.

Later we too were parents and took our daughters to pick out a live tree each year at local tree farms in and around Southern NJ. Our younger daughter always marched to her own drummer, so we would have to be vigilant not to leave her hidden among some row of trees. She was compelled to sit down and talk to all manner of forbs on the ground, making little pine needle teepees and such.

Once she picked out a tree that was about one foot tall and insisted it was "the one." That year we bought an 18" artificial tree for her room and have used it as an accent decoration for more than a quarter of a century. But each year we select an eight-foot cut tree for our living room.

So begins the debate over what is environmentally better: an artificial tree or a fresh-cut tree.

There are a number of things to take into account but experts in evaluating

this kind of thing seem to agree that a locally grown fresh-cut tree is best.

Frank Lowenstein, Director of Climate adaptation for The Nature Conservancy, does a great review of why live trees are superior to fake trees. Here are his findings, embellished by me:

- Buying from a local farm helps to keep more land open and undeveloped and it supports a local business. It also minimizes the transportation impacts. (When buying vegetables, buying local has the same advantages. Thus the trends in locavore and seasonal eating.)
- Real trees are more easily recycled. I'll add, fake trees are made from plastics and are considered non-biodegradable. It is estimated that they degrade only over the course of 500 years. And since most people replace them, landfills are unnecessarily accommodating them.
- Manufacturing an artificial tree uses electricity mostly generated from coal plants that are one of the most common sources of carbon dioxide air pollution.
- For every tree cut and carted, most farmers grow three. Trees take sunlight to produce wood, starch and sugar, or photosynthesis. This process is called

carbon sequestration, wherein plants take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and store it in their biomass (trunk, branches, foliage and roots). Ultimately this helps to reduce global climate change and gives us clean air to breathe.

The internet is rife with uses for live cut trees. Some shore towns place cut trees on beach fronts where they collect windblown sands and create dunes that help with erosion and create more natural habitats. Some municipalities collect the trees and chip them for mulch. Fisherman sometimes use them for fish shelter.

Placing your discarded tree at the base of your birdfeeder gives birds a place to drop quickly into cover to avoid aerial predators.

You can cut boughs and lay the limbs over perennials to blanket them from winter's woes. Or use them on ground crops like strawberries where they provide moisture and mold-free mulch.

The pine is not suitable indoor firewood because of creosote that can collect in your flue or chimney and become a fire hazard. It is okay for an outdoor fire. But remember, burning does have carbon implications.

Strip the limbs of needles and use scraps of cloth to sew small sachet pillows to freshen the air in select spots in your home: e.g. under trash liners, foot lockers, in cellars...

Some folks make discs from the trunk for coasters and trivets. If you do this you should dry the discs on a lined cookie sheet at 175° for 2-3 hours to kill insects and to dry sap. Discs are also good fire starters but again creosote is a concern.

Personally I like the odor of a live tree. But for people with allergies they can be problematic. Some apartments prohibit live trees because of fire concerns. If you do go the live route be sure to water the tree frequently. The needles will be retained better and this will lessen the chance of a fire. When the tree stops drinking water it is time to get it out of the house. And when it's time to buy new strings of lights, be sure to choose more energy-efficient LED lamps. They will save electric and burn cooler.

In some instances, experts suggest that artificial trees become less of an environmental burden when you surpass five years of use. I would propose that they can be used much longer. But based on my reading, choosing to use a live cut tree should

be people's preference. And getting a family into the selection process means some time together out-of-doors!

The New Jersey Christmas Tree Growers Association has an online list of farms that sell trees. To find a Christmas tree farm near you, visit [njchristmastrees.org/find-a-farm](http://njchristmastrees.org/find-a-farm)