

Trees for Christmas

If you choose to buy a living Christmas tree, which factors are worth considering before hanging the baubles and draping your tinsel?

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Whatever first inspired people to harvest a tree from the forest, put it in their house and decorate it? Today, this is such a widely practised tradition that we barely question its origins, which are obscure. What we do know is that people were displaying trees in central Europe as part of Christmas celebrations as long ago as the 15th century, and that it became so popular in the German city of Freiburg that officials had to ban felling trees for Christmas in 1554 in order to prevent unsustainable harvesting.

So from the early days it was necessary to manage Christmas tree production to supply demand. In years gone by, farmers put aside small areas of land for growing Christmas trees, but North American methods have crept in and now growers are likely to be specialists in charge of plantations numbering perhaps hundreds of thousands of trees. In 2018, records show it was a multi-million pound industry with 6–8 million trees sold in the UK every year.

Growing perfect Christmas trees

A lot of people think that there is not a great deal of work in growing Christmas trees. ‘They just grow, don’t they?’ or ‘What do you do the rest of the

year?’ are common questions that a Christmas tree grower will get asked, but there is more to it than that. Christmas tree production is a six- to eight-year cycle (10–14 years if you include the seedling stage) that needs careful management if trees are to reach a saleable size in good condition, and meet customers’ expectations. Each Christmas tree plantation is essentially a forest of mini-trees that are trimmed and shaped each year to keep them neat and pretty; left to grow on, most species offered are forest trees that will eventually attain heights of (30m) 98ft or more.

The range of Christmas trees offered to the public is slim. Most buying for the home will be presented with two types: ‘drop’ and ‘non-drop’, which indicates how well the cut tree might hold onto its needles over the festive period. Not many species of conifer grow to meet the standard of a perfect Christmas tree – an upright tree 1.5–4.2m

Nordmann fir

Nordmann fir (*Abies nordmanniana*, above) is perhaps the most popular Christmas tree for its non-drop needles.

Pot-grown Nordmann firs will make handsome, if large, trees if planted out in the garden (right).



Norway spruce

Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) makes a well-shaped, dense tree (left) but is prone to needle drop. Planted trees become large once established (above).



Fraser fir

Popular in the USA, Fraser fir (*Abies fraseri*) can make a good choice. Even cut trees, especially used outdoors, will hold their needles well, as this display (left) at New York Botanical Garden in the USA shows.



Christmas trees

(5–14ft) tall (or more), with a perfect church-spire shape, a uniform covering of bushy, deep green foliage, and branches that are stiff enough to support decorations.

Which Christmas trees to choose

The classic 'non-drop' tree is seen now by many UK households to be the Nordmann fir (*Abies nordmanniana*) 2. Much preferred for its excellent needle-holding properties, well-grown trees make beautiful specimens for home decoration, but firs are not easy trees to grow. The leading shoot is easily damaged, causing crooked growth; wet summers can cause excessive growth and poorly spaced branch tiers, and inadequate soils can cause discolouring of the foliage.

Other so-called 'non-drop' Christmas trees include Fraser fir (*Abies fraseri*) 10, Noble fir (*Abies procera*) 8, Korean fir (*Abies koreana* AGM) 1 and Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*). Relatively new on the market is corkbark fir (*Abies lasiocarpa* var. *arizonica*) 7, which is growing well in some UK plantations and may become more widely available. Fraser fir, with its upright branches, does not enjoy the same popularity in the UK as in North America, even though it has attractive silvery-green, fragrant foliage and a slender habit that suits smaller living rooms particularly well.

Although it is normal for 'non-drop' trees to also shed needles once cut, large-scale shedding indicates a problem with the tree, which should be returned to the vendor for a replacement or refund.

Pine trees (*Pinus*) are sometimes offered for sale as Christmas trees. Various species respond well to clipping in early summer, but the result is quite bushy and broad – good for those people looking >>



Pinus contorta

Pinus contorta (above) are sometimes offered as cut Christmas trees. This species is a large, broad tree too big for many gardens (right).



More sustainable tree growing

Christmas trees are a high-value crop, so it is hardly surprising growers protect trees from weeds, pests and diseases with the help of chemicals. But times are changing, and the public as well as directives from the EU require growers to minimise use of pesticides and fungicides. The main challenges are posed by green spruce aphids on crops of spruce, woolly aphids on Fraser firs, and various fungal diseases of Nordmann firs.

Growers can manage plantations (left) to encourage beneficial insects and insect-eating birds, and develop cultural techniques to help prevent diseases from taking hold. The near monoculture of single species, however, increases the potential for the uncontrolled development of new diseases, and the arrival of new pests (such as the eight-toothed spruce bark beetle found in woodland in Kent in 2018) pose a future threat.



Which tree will you decorate this Christmas?

- 1 *Abies koreana* AGM
- 2 *Abies nordmanniana*
- 3 *Picea pungens* Glauca Group
- 4 *Pinus contorta*
- 5 *Abies lasiocarpa* var. *arizonica*
- 6 *Picea abies*
- 7 *Picea omorika* AGM
- 8 *Abies procera*
- 9 *Pinus sylvestris*
- 10 *Abies fraseri*



Spruce in a pot

A potted Norway spruce can be decorated and displayed outdoors, or bought in and placed in a cool, bright position for a week or so. Keep repotting annually, then plant out when it gets too large.



Not just for Christmas

Pot-grown Nordmann firs are worth seeking out; if you begin with a smaller example you can grow it on for several years, bringing it indoors for Christmas.

for something a bit different. Lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*) 4 or Scots pine (*P. sylvestris*) 9 are most often offered in the UK.

Trees that 'drop' include the spruces, most notably the Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) 5. Once almost as synonymous with Christmas as the turkey, its popularity has been eclipsed by the Nordmann fir, but it is still among the most often seen for sale. Spruces are also bit more 'unfriendly', with harder, sharper needles that make trees difficult to handle without gloves. However, a freshly cut spruce tree kept well watered over Christmas will have an indoor life expectancy of two or three weeks. Once the branches have dried out, needles will fall.

Spruces also mature faster than fir trees, don't require as much maintenance and are generally less of a fiddle to grow. This is reflected in their retail price. Blue spruce (*Picea pungens* Glauca Group) 3 with striking ice-blue (but sharp) needles and Serbian spruce (*Picea omorika* AGM) 6 with silvery blue undersides to the needles and a graceful slender habit, are two common alternatives to Norway spruce. All have fragrant needles, particularly blue spruce, and this can bring a delightful dimension that other trees sometimes lack.

With 75 percent of the UK's Christmas trees grown on home soil, according to industry figures, the time is ripe to buy a locally grown tree. Although most growers concentrate solely on the most popular cultivars, those that sell directly to the public are likely to offer more choice. An alternative tree this Christmas might therefore be worth seeking out. ●

Cut, containerised or pot grown?

Needle-retention trials by the British Christmas Tree Growers' Association have found that early cutting dates result in fewer fresh trees at the end of December. Keep this in mind with 'non-drop' trees – they look fresh at point of sale, regardless of cutting date. UK growers are able to cut later and supply markets more rapidly than continental counterparts, so it is best to buy a locally grown tree as freshly cut as possible.

Christmas trees sold with pots will either have been grown in their container, or dug up and put in a pot (containerised). Look for pot-grown trees (above, left); not only will they last longer as they have a complete rootball, they can even be planted out afterwards as a garden tree, or if carefully cared for, repotted and kept from year to year, until they get too big. For tips on caring for a potted Christmas tree, see *RHS Advice*, p18.

Other points to consider

Try to choose locally grown Christmas trees to help reduce the carbon footprint of transporting it.

Dispose of cut Christmas trees in your garden waste, compost it, take it to the local household waste or use a Christmas tree collection service. Do not send it to landfill; recycling or even burning reduces your tree's carbon footprint by up to 80 percent. Planting a pot-grown tree after use is the best option of all.

Resources

Pot-grown examples of plants mentioned here are listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2019*, and online at rhs.org.uk/findaplant

Hear Simon Maughan talk more about Christmas trees on The Garden Podcast this month. rhs.org.uk/thegardenpodcast