Selecting a FRESH Christmas Tree

If you want your holiday season to be free from the dangers of fire, make certain that the Christmas tree that you are buying is fresh.

1. Gently grasp a branch with your fingers and pull towards you. Very few needles should come off in your hand. If the needles look a little whitish or shrunken, chances are that the tree has already begun to dry out.

2. Grasp a few needles between your thumb and forefinger, and bend them under your thumb at approximately right angles and give a steady pull. If the needles bend without breaking, this is a good indication that the tree is fresh.

3. Lift the tree off the ground and hit the butt end of the stem on hard ground or pavement. If many green colored needles shatter from the tree, it is a sign of dryness. If only a few green needles are loosened by the impact, the tree is fresh.

Read more on selecting and caring for Christmas trees (PDF)
Does Your Firewood Come with Unexpected Guests?

Several types of beetles may emerge from firewood that is stored indoors. Bark beetles (pictured right) are 1/4 inch or less in length, cylindrical in shape and red, black or brown in color. They may be found around windows, lamps or woodpiles near the fireplace, especially during the winter. Check firewood logs for small, round holes in the bark.

Larger wood boring beetles may also be seen. They may be metallic wood borers (e.g. two-lined chestnut borer, approximately 1/2 inch long, narrow, variously colored, with short antennae) or long-horned beetles (pictured below: redheaded ash borer, 1/2 inch or longer, narrow, variously colored, long antennae and legs, not metallic). Sawdust may be found under the firewood and oval or D-shaped exit holes may be present in the bark of logs.

The beetles may emerge from firewood that has been stored indoors for several days or more. As the wood warms, the beetles assume it is spring and emerge. They may fly around the house or congregate in windows trying to get outdoors. Vacuum and dispose of the beetles in the trash outdoors. Only store enough firewood in the home for a day or two to prevent the beetles from emerging.

by Mary Kay Malinoski

→ Read more on firewood insects

Grow It Eat It 🌽

Cover Your Exposed Soil With Leaves for the Winter

Monday was World Soil Day as declared by the United Nations General Assembly. Protecting your garden's soil over the winter is essential for your growing season next year, and using leaves is an easy solution.

Covering your growing area with fallen leaves will prevent weeds from growing and keep soil erosion to a minimum. In addition, as the leaves decompose, they will be providing vital nutrients to the soil, helping your 2017 plants thrive!

Mulched leaves are best, as they decompose more quickly and are less prone to blowing away, but whole leaves can be used as well. Whole leaves may leave a layer of wet leaves for you to move to the side before you begin your growing season.
Read how the Derwood Demo garden was prepared for the winter on the GIEI Blog

Featured Video

Digging Deeper - Care of Poinsettias

David Clement, Ph.D, Extension Specialist and Plant Pathologist, shares instructions on caring for Poinsettias.

View on YouTube

View Houseplants and Indoor Gardening Playlist YouTube

Q&A

My very large oak tree has limbs that hang over portions of my roof. I am looking for information and guidance on pruning this tree. When is the best time to prune and is it okay to ‘top’ the tree?

Topping trees is not a recommended pruning
practice. The pruning cuts caused by topping are difficult for trees to repair. The subsequent growth the tree produces is fast-growing, weak and subject to break during storms making the tree more dangerous. Look for a reputable arborist that can remove the overhanging limbs. If the overall size of the tree must be reduced, a qualified tree company can prune with a technique called crown reduction. Crown reduction minimizes stress on the tree, preserves the natural appearance and is used when the height and spread of individual branches need to be reduced. The winter or dormant season is the best time to prune your tree. See publication HG 84 - Pruning Ornamental Plants (PDF) for additional information on pruning.

Read more on pruning and care of trees and shrubs

Have a plant or pest question? University of Maryland Extension’s experts have answers! Send in your questions and photos to Ask an Expert.

Have a suggestion for a topic to cover in the HGIC newsletter? Send in your suggestions.