

Fresh trees offer plenty of holiday choices

How's that Christmas list coming along? Lights up? Got those cards sent out? How about the Christmas tree? Take a deep breath. A fresh tree can help make the house smell like Christmas. This is the biggest week for fresh Christmas tree sales. Many people wait until a couple of weeks before the big day to start decorating with fresh greens.

Shake-tug-break

If you have to buy a precut tree, don't forget to do the shake-tug-break test. Shake the tree. If needles drop, it's too dry; pick another tree. Tug the needles gently. If more than a couple pull off in your hand, it's getting too dry. Then, try breaking a needle. It shouldn't snap in your grip. A well watered tree should have flexible and fragrant needles.

Marriage-saving trees

Dick and Mary Ann Bostdorff say they have heard many squabbles between spouses begin with a Christmas tree. "The husband and wife argue because the tree is crooked or not on the stand tight enough." Mr. Bostdorff says. We've had that problem in the Heidbreder house, too. My husband received coal in his stocking from Santa one year because our 12-foot Frasier fir fell flat on its face in the middle of the living room. Other couples nag at each other as they try to tie the tree to their car.

The Bostdorffs' Bowling Green greenhouse is stocked with precut Frasier and Douglas fir trees grown in the Smokey Mountains. "We started what we call our Marriage-Saving Service," he says. "We will put the tree on the stand for you and even deliver it with a smile."

Christmas memories

The Christmas season goes fast, so instead of just going through the motions, make every event count. Cut your own tree and make a memory at the same time. David Reese, owner of Kaleidoscope Farms in Mount Cory, Ohio, says sales are up about 12 percent over last year. "About half of our trees are Canaan firs, a quarter are white pines, and another quarter are Scotch pines. We have a lot of other kinds, like blue spruce, Black Hills spruce, and Concolor fir, too." He has been growing trees on his 26-acre farm for more than 20 years.

Mr. Reese will fuss with a tree for seven years before you make it the center of attention in your living room. "I fight weeds, flooding, drought, insects, fungus, and disease to get the trees to a marketable size." He and his sons plant three acres of trees a year. They have 18 acres planted right now and will have the entire farm planted and in the pruning process within the next four years. And they are constantly looking out for birds to make sure they don't break off the tree's main leader branch at the top, and for little varmints to make sure they don't nibble around the base of the tree or destroy its root system.

Mr. Reese shapes his trees from June until September. "I'm in there at the hottest and buggiest time of the year. It takes me a long time because I shape every tree by hand."

Yes, your Christmas tree should be green and have a trunk and branches. But the rest is up to you. It could be short and fat or tall and thin. You might like a tree with short, stiff needles to hold some heavy ornaments, or you might prefer a more friendly fir with long, soft needles.

Mr. Reese says Scotch pine has been a big favorite for many years, but he says Frasier and Douglas firs are on the rise.

"Canaan fir trees are my favorite," he says. "It looks a lot like a Frasier. It grows faster and it has an old-fashioned look to it. It has friendlier needles than the Douglas fir or any of the pines." He says his farm was one of the first in the state to start growing the Canaan fir and now the species has really taken off.

Nonallergenic trees

Could there be such a thing? Mr. Reese says he has a species that won't bother people with an allergy to pine or fir trees. "We are just starting to grow the Concolor fir. Its needles are more succulent." According to Mr. Reese, growers say customers are giving up their fake trees for these. "We have a few precut trees on our lot, but our own should be ready for next Christmas," he says.

Now, if I could only find that big wad of Christmas lights.