

Living Christmas Trees

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Each year it seems more and more people are interested in living Christmas trees that, come spring, can become part of their landscape. Growing up in central coastal California my folks had a big redwood planter with a pine in it that was rolled in and out each season. The tree would be decorated and indoors for over a week. The biggest challenge was drying out and losing needles so vigilance towards the trees soil moisture is about all it took. But our below freezing temperatures make big, big difference in how easy it is to have a living Christmas tree.

First, of course, choose species that will do well in our area – ponderosa, Austrian, or Scotch pine; Black Hills, Colorado green, Fat Albert, or Alberta spruce are good choices. Then there's how to display a living Christmas tree. Easiest is to keep it outside on a deck or patio, keeping it in the environment it's already acclimated to.



For an inside tree display there are two options, one better than the other. The less-good option is a long-term commitment at keeping the tree indoors until it's time to dig in the spring. Almost all nursery trees are grown outside their entire lives and consequently are acclimated to that environment. Making them indoor plants for multiple months with drier and warmer conditions will stress them. If this is the option chosen, find a cool but not freezing and away from any direct sunlight location for the tree to stay until spring. Reduce watering, do not fertilize, and hope for the best. If the tree starts to decline, suddenly putting it outside into freezing conditions will be fatal and is not an option. Keeping the tree indoors until Christmas and suddenly putting it in freezing conditions will also be fatal.

The best indoor option is to treat the tree as a one-day Christmas tree. It comes in Christmas eve and goes out Christmas day. Not exactly what everyone wants for Christmas, but this year has been especially good for "not exactly what everyone wants." By the time Christmas rolls around likely we've been in sub-freezing weather for some time. Enough time that the root balls of potted trees are also frozen, and the tree's health needs the root ball to stay frozen until spring. You do not want the tree to break dormancy. Bring it in, decorate it, go to sleep, wake up, unwrap gifts, start the cooking, and put the tree back outside. If you're really on the ball, before the ground freezes in the fall dig the hole where the tree will be planted so it can be dropped in as it's being put out, back fill, mulch, done!

If you like the idea of a living tree but don't have a place to plant one, our city parks department and schools have plenty of areas for donated trees. When our trees in California eventually grew too big they were donated to the school across the street. Most of them ended up staying in 5th grade even longer than I did!

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