

It's Christmas Tree Time

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Like it or not (and I do like it) Thanksgiving is behind us and we're full on into Christmas season. Which means that it's time to put up your Christmas tree. Many people use an artificial Christmas tree and that's fine. But many of us prefer a real Christmas tree and that means picking out a fresh tree and doing everything you can to keep it fresh.

If you purchase your tree from a cut your own tree farm, or go out in the pasture to cut a cedar or, like me, get your's mail order from the mountains of North Carolina, then you are getting a fresh tree. If you are buying it pre-cut from a local establishment then take a few minutes to check it for freshness. When needles are bent between your thumb and forefinger it should easily bend, not snap like a matchstick. When you grab the tree and thump it sharply on the ground there will be a few needles fall out, but it shouldn't be excessive.

All evergreen trees have a resinous compound in the sap. This compound is highly flammable. We try to keep the tree as fresh as possible because the more moisture that's in the sap the lower the fire risk is. But as the tree ages it becomes harder to keep it fresh. The moisture content of the sap declines during the time the tree is in your house such that by the time we get to New Year's, you really have a ticking time bomb sitting in that tree stand.

The resinous compound in the Christmas tree sap is the stickiness you sometimes encounter with the tree. One of the things that this sap does is to try to seal over any cuts or injuries to the tree. The sap oozes out, the water evaporates and the remaining resin sort of serves as a scab, for lack of a better term. This same thing happens to the stump end of the tree when it is cut down. Once you get the tree home you want to get it up in the stand and in water as soon as possible. But the last thing to do before you put it in the stand is to cut off 3/8 to 1/2 of an inch of the trunk. Just as soon as you do that (well, within a few minutes anyway) get it in the stand and get the stand filled up with water.

Over the years there have been all sorts of concoctions mixed up and additives sold that are supposed to keep Christmas trees fresher longer. Ultimately there is only one consistent thing that we have found that has worked: water. We now generally feel that other additives simply don't make enough difference to be worth the hassle, or the white spot on the carpet if you happened to spill some while watering the tree. Fill the tree stand up with water as soon as the tree is put up. Check it two to four times a day the first week and then twice a day the rest of the time that it is up.

If you are going to be gone for several days over Christmas be prepared to take the tree down BEFORE you leave or take it down and out of the house as soon as you get back home after Christmas. It helps if you can get the tree some daylight by opening window blinds near the tree. Try to turn off furnace vents or redirect them in the immediate vicinity of the tree as well to keep hot drying air off the tree. Also keep open flames far away from your tree!

Lastly, if you use real greenery for decorations remember that this live material is not in water and dries very quickly. Don't put up the decorations until the last minute and keep it in a cool dark place until you put it in the house to keep it as fresh as possible. Also remove these decorations as soon as possible also. Enjoy your real tree and greenery, but do it safely!