

History of the Christmas Tree

It's amazing how much history there is about the origin of the Christmas Tree. It seems that even ancient people thought that plants and trees that remained green all year had special meaning. In many countries it was believed that the evergreens kept away witches, ghosts, evil spirits, and illness – which is why they hung boughs of evergreens everywhere around their homes.

The winter solstice was a highly important time of year for many ancient cultures. Most believed that the sun was a god and that when winter came it meant that the sun god was weak. Celebration of the solstice meant that the sun god was becoming strong again... the green plants would again start to grow and summer would return! The Egyptians would fill their homes with green palm rushes when celebrating the triumph of Ra, their sun god. Early Romans held celebrations in honor of Saturn, their god of agriculture. To them the solstice meant the fields would again be green with new crops. They decorated with evergreen boughs. Druids decorated their temples with evergreen boughs as well, as a symbol of everlasting life. And even the Vikings thought that evergreens were a special plant of their sun god, Balder.

But we credit the 16th century Germans with the actual Christmas Tree that we know and love today. There is a popular story about Martin Luther, the 16th century Protestant reformer, being the first to add lighted candles to a tree. During a walk one winter evening, he was in awe of the beauty of the twinkling stars amidst the evergreen trees and in order to recapture the scene for his family, he put a tree in the home and decorated it with lighted candles.

In the 19th century most Americans thought these Christmas Trees were a bit of an oddity, and it took them quite a while to warm up to the idea. The first record of one being on display was in the 1830s by German settlers in Pennsylvania (although the trees had been a tradition in Germany for years). In the 1840s, Christmas Trees were seen as pagan symbols and not accepted by most Americans. The festive activities that we enjoy today (Christmas carols, decorated

trees, etc...) were, to the Puritans back then, a mockery of “that sacred event.” Some northern states even passed a law that stated anything other than a church service was considered a penal offense; people were fined for hanging decorations. The strictness of the times was lessened as the German and Irish immigrants flowed in.

The Christmas Tree hadn't officially arrived in America until 1846, when Queen Victoria and her family were sketched for an illustration standing around a Christmas Tree. Queen Victoria was well liked by her subjects, so anything she did was immediately fashionable – even on the American East Coast.

Later in the century, Christmas Tree popularity was on the rise and decorations were being shipped in from Germany. While Europeans opted for smaller four foot trees, Americans liked their trees to stand from floor to ceiling! Decoration options varied with Americans decorating their trees with more homemade ornaments, while German-Americans used apples, nuts, and cookies. Electricity brought about a whole new way to decorate. Christmas lights allowed the tree to glow for hours and days on end. When this happened, community trees started popping up all around the country and the American tradition of having a Christmas Tree in the home was born.

Now I know there is much more history and many more stories/legends about the Christmas Tree. This article is only an overview of some stories. Please feel free to research it more – it is quite interesting... and Merry Christmas!

- Heather Neuin
Pennsylvania Pride Grow Team

