

Live Christmas Tree Care

Each Christmas season, many homeowners take the opportunity to add to their landscapes by using B&B (balled & burlapped) or potted LIVE evergreens for their indoor Christmas Tree. While on the surface this may seem difficult, it is in fact pretty simple to be successful with following a few basic guidelines, common sense, and being aware of the weather.

Most LIVE trees are harvested in October and become available to you in early November. Responsible growers will go to great lengths to harvest these evergreens early in the fall season. In most areas they allow harvest shock to pass and even expect some root regeneration through the Fall right up to the holiday season. It is very important that when choosing a B&B evergreen to choose one with a very tight and firm root ball, not overly wet and soft; this is a sure sign of poor handling in the nursery. Many LIVE evergreens are available in some sort of container (even though the tree may have been dug and then placed into the container), this removes much of the risk in mishandling of the root ball. We grow our LIVE evergreens in containers for the tree's entire life. We believe this offers the absolute highest chance of transplant success at any time of the year. When you have the choice, always ask for container grown trees of any kind. The benefits of containers are numerous. Look for our upcoming article that addresses this issue early next spring.

After selecting the most well-grown, harvested, and cared for LIVE evergreen, the next challenge becomes acclimating the tree to go indoors and then outdoors again (maybe even in and out of dormancy). Depending on your area, your tree may have already frozen in full or it may have just experienced cold temperatures. Regardless, our job is to slowly introduce the tree to a cooler, warmer, and moister environment before we take it into our living room. This is where a little common sense comes in and having a watchful eye on the weather.

If current weather conditions are 40 to 50°, moist, and lows only around 35° or so, leave the tree

right out in the yard. If they deteriorate to more winter-like conditions, then consider moving it into the garage or breezeway. Leave it somewhere that offers 40 to 50° for about a week before taking it inside to 65 to 70°. You see, we must slowly 'warm' up the tree on the way in the same way we will slowly 'cool' the tree on the way out.

Step by step is as follows: from the nursery to 40 to 50° for about a week; inside for about 7 to 10 days; back to 40 to 50° for about a week; and then back outside where Mother Nature takes over. During these times it is important for the tree to have access to water in the root zone but not to the point of being soggy, just moist. And remember, keeping moisture at medium levels will also reduce the weight of the tree when it comes time to move.

Once in your home, the same common sense rules apply for the LIVE tree as they do for your cut Christmas Tree. Keep your house cooler when possible, do not display near open flames or near other heat sources, and keep your eye on proper water levels the entire in and out cycle.

After the holiday, once your tree has acclimated back into our 40 to 50° area, it is important once again to apply common sense before moving the tree outside for the remainder of the winter. Avoid moving it outside until the weather offers some kind of relief, maybe a couple of mild days, no wind or severe cold, and make sure at this time you water very well.

Many recommend planting at this point if possible. I would actually prefer placing the tree outside in a wind-protected location and mulching the root ball or pot with leaves or other yard debris until spring thaw and then plant. The most common cause for failure is desiccation, the drying of the tree, while inside or out. The second most common reason for failure is exposure to harsh conditions too quickly after being inside.

Keep these few simple things in mind and you can be successful with your LIVE tree: Even moisture; Not too high and definitely not too dry; Protect from wind; Protect the root ball through mulching or planting; Choose a potted tree when you can; and Choose a quality tree to begin with.

- Don Eaton
Pennsylvania Pride Grow Team