

Christmas trees tend to get bigger at home

One perplexing problem in picking an evergreen Christmas tree is that it seems to grow bigger on the trip home. Sometimes shoppers have to prune their tree, just to get it in the house.

"Trees tend to look small when the sky is the ceiling. It's a simple matter of perspective. It's also why you need to shop with a tape measure and the dimension of the space where you plan to put the tree - width, as well as ceiling height. A 10-foot tree can easily be eight feet wide at the bottom," said Jamie Hancock, Kansas State Research and Extension horticulturist.

Another worry for real-tree buyers is how long their choice will last.

"Typically that comes down to how long the tree has been separated from its roots and how well you keep it watered," Hancock said.

"The first factor relates to where you buy your tree, and a few shopping tips can help there. But, the second will always be a problem unless you understand what happens after an evergreen's cut."

Christmas trees seem heavy when first harvested because more than half of their weight is water, she said. As the cut end dries out, it

Consider variety when buying

Whether growing on a farm or waiting in a Christmas tree lot, all conifers drop a certain amount of their oldest needles. This is normal.

"In fact, most farms provide a shaking or blowing machine to clean your tree before they net it," Hancock said.

Another key factor is to check the trunk, as well as a tree's overall appearance.

• Pines, for example, will usually have at least some crook in their trunks. The tree you choose should be sufficiently straight for a good display," Hancock said.

With cut trees, sign of deal-breaking dryness can include excessive needle loss, discolored

quickly seals itself with resin in an attempt to save the moisture. Given time and exposure to wind or heat (including sunlight), however, the trees soon dry out and lose weight.

"...unless, of course, you help a purchased tree start absorbing water again. Often, that can extend tree

foliage, musty odor and/or wrinkled bark.

"On more promising trees, you can do an actual freshness test by simply wrapping some needles around your fingers. The needles will bend, not break, if the tree is fresh," Hancock said. "With most evergreens, then you can bend some needles more sharply, to see if the needles break crisply - much like fresh carrots. That's another sign of greenness - except for fresh pines. Pine needles won't break until they're very, very dry."

The horticulturist's other suggestions:

- Wear gloves, sturdy shoes and comfortable clothes.
- Take your tape measure, but

leave the dog at home, Dogs like to "mark" trees.

less likely to bruise or get the cut end dirty. I also can leave the bucketed tree there overnight or even longer, so it can rehydrate in a cool, dark place," she said.

"Later, when I'm ready to put the tree in a stand, I'll cut another inch or two from the end. If I manage to

saw straight across - at a right angle to the trunk - the rehydrated tree will also have a steady base."

A quality display stand will hold a tree securely upright and will also hold enough water to keep it hydrated. As a rule of thumb, a stand should hold at least one quart of water for every inch of the tree's trunk diameter. And, it should be big enough that the tree will fit without whittling bark from its trunk end.

"Those outer layers of wood are the most efficient at taking up water. The tree needs them," Hancock said. "Drilling a hole up the center of the trunk won't help, either."

Tree owners should not allow the water level to get low enough that the trunk's cut end dries out and reseals itself.

"The easier the stand is to check and refill every day, the more likely you'll be to do that important job," the horticulturist said. "If you're shopping for a new stand, you'll probably find several products with clever ways to make the task more convenient. But, you also can just secure a length of flexible tubing to a thin-spotted watering can. Then you can extend the tubing down through the decorated tree - no kneeling involved."

Tap water if fine, she said. Adding sugar, pennies or commercial additives to the water isn't necessary.

"The only other thing you can do to make a big difference in your tree's lasting ability is to keep it away from heat. Don't place it next to a heat vent, incandescent lamp, sunny window or fireplace. Replace any old-fashioned, heat-generating light string with cool miniature lights," Hancock said. "And, if you're really invested in making the tree last, lower the room temperature, too."

Join us at the Christmas on Us drawing on 4 p.m. Tuesday in front of Central Elementary School

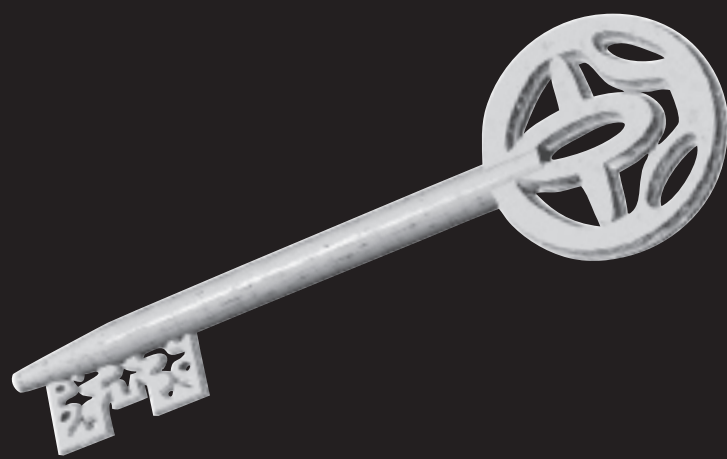
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