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Caring for your Christmas tree

December is here and many of us will start bringing evergreen trees into our home for the Christmas season. Often, people wonder, how do I make my Christmas tree last longer? Luckily, there are a few things you can do to prolong the life of your Christmas tree, allowing it to last up to five weeks.

When picking out a tree, first think about the trunk. The trunk should be straight so that the tree does not lean when you put it up. The diameter of the trunk at the base also needs to be small enough to fit into your tree stand. Whittling or cutting the sides of the trunk to make it fit into a small stand will prevent it from being able to take up water. It is a good idea to measure your tree stand and take the measuring tape with you to the tree farm.

Next, make sure the tree is fresh. Run your hands over the branches, and if needles fall off or break look for a different tree. A fresh tree will have pliant needles that bend and stay onto the branch. Try bending a branch and see if it snaps. Brittle branches are a sign of an older tree, while bendy branches indicate freshness. Lastly, you can lift the tree a few inches and drop it so the base of the trunk hits the ground. If a lot of needles fall off, this indicates an older tree.

When you bring home the tree, the first thing to do is cut at least $\frac{1}{2}$ inch off the bottom of the trunk. When a cut has been exposed to the air for more than 6 hours, the cells on the cut become blocked and cannot take up water. A fresh cut ensures that your tree is able to absorb water and live longer. Do not try to angle the cut or create a v-notch on the trunk. It does not increase water uptake and a flat cut across the bottom provides more stability. If you need to store your tree for a few days before setting it up, place it in an unheated garage or shed where it is protected from wind and freezing temperatures. Place the freshly cut butt of the trunk in a bucket of water.

When setting up the tree, make sure it is not near heat sources or drafts. A heat source near the tree can be a fire hazard, and warm drafts will cause the tree to dry out faster. Check that your tree lights are approved for use on live trees and produce little heat. It is also a good idea to check the lights for any damage to the cords to prevent risk of fire.

Your tree stand should ideally be a sturdy material that can hold enough water for your tree; a general rule of thumb is either a gallon of water or one quart of water per inch diameter of the tree. Use cool water and make sure to never let the tree run out of water. Depending on the size of the tree, it may use over two quarts of water a day during the first week. It is normal for the tree to take up less water overtime. Start by checking water levels twice a day for the first two weeks, then check at least daily. While there are additives for Christmas tree water meant to provide nutrients, research shows that plain water is sufficient, and additives offer no real benefit. In some cases, they can even harm the tree. If you have trouble getting to the base of the tree once its full of ornaments and surrounded by presents, you can use a funnel to make the process easier.

Lastly, make sure to monitor your tree for dryness and brittle needles, as these are signs that the tree should be removed. A dry tree can easily become a fire hazard and put a damper on your Christmas festivities.