

Happy Holidays

Christmas

Keeping Christmas all-natural this year

By Amy Cavalier

As you get ready to deck the halls this year, make it an experience. Bundle up the family and head outside to a real Christmas tree farm where you can hike through the fields and pick the perfect centerpiece to your holiday. And while you're at it, why not go the extra mile and decorate the tree in all natural materials like dried fruits, flowers, pinecones, popcorn and cranberries, herbs or even feathers?

This year is the 500th year anniversary of a decorated Christmas tree. According to the National Christmas Tree Association, the first written record of a decorated Christmas tree dates back to 1510 when in Riga, Latvia, men of the local merchants' guild decorated a tree with artificial roses, danced around it in the marketplace and then set fire to it.

Getting creative when it comes to decorating can save you money, give you an excuse to head outdoors, and create unique memories for years to come. From finding the right real tree for your family, to creating homemade decorations, this is your guide to keeping Christmas all-natural this year.

Christmas Trees 101

Maybe you like the smell of the tree or you have someone in the house with allergies who doesn't tolerate strong smells. Maybe you've got a cat that can't resist the tree's dangling ornaments. Or maybe you have an eye for decorating and you want a tree that's a particular color, or with branches able to support heavy ornaments. There's enough variety out there to please everyone, according to Walt Nelson, agriculture and horticulture program leader with the Monroe County Cornell Cooperative Extension.

Douglas fir has a medium-length needle, and the stem strength is firm but limber, which means you can't hang really heavy decorations on it. It is mildly fragrant, so Nelson said, if you're buying a real tree for the smell, this shouldn't be at the top of your list. The tree can be difficult to set up and decorate.

"I think you have to be somewhat of a masochist to pick a Douglas fir," Nelson said. "They are very short needles on very stiff branches, and you will get pricked."

That being said, if you've got a cat that likes to climb, this is the tree for you.

Blue spruce is a short-needled variety with a bluish cast. Nelson said these trees have excellent needle retention, and if watered properly, will stay fresh-looking for months. They also hold heavy ornaments well. Fragrance is non-existent for blue spruces, which is probably true of all spruces, said Nelson.

Scotch and Austrian pines have medium to long needles, don't have a strong smell, and are dark green in color. The longer needle can pose a little more difficulty than the spruce for hanging ornaments, and needles will start to fall off after about three weeks on these trees.

If you want a tree with a citrus smell to it, then you're looking for a white or concolor fir. This tree has the longest needles of any type of fir tree and somewhat firm branches for decorating. White or concolor fir will put off a bluish cast, but not as blue as a spruce. One advantage to having a fir tree is, they are very pest and disease free, so tree growers don't have to spray them with pesticides as often as other varieties, Nelson said.

Balsam fir are probably the most fragrant tree you'll find on the lot. They are green in color and have short needles.

Of course, keeping the tree well watered is essential to keeping it looking fresh through the season and preventing it from drying out and becoming potentially flammable. Nelson suggests looking for a stand that holds a lot of water and checking it a few times a week.

When it comes to disposing of your tree, there are several environmentally-friendly options available. Many municipalities will pick them up curbside and chip them up into mulch, which they offer to residents for no cost, said Nelson. If you have a lot of land, the tree can be put out as a shelter for birds, or in a pond where it can sink and provide shelter for the fish in the pond. You can even clip off some needles and put them in a paper bag to create a sachet for your closet or cut off the branches and put them over your perennials during the winter to serve as insulation.

Keep it natural

Getting a real tree is a way to bring nature into your home, so why not go all the way and decorate using nature-inspired ornaments? All you have to do is take a look back in history to find inspirational ideas for decorating your tree naturally.

According to the National Christmas Tree Association, in 16th century Austria and Germany, evergreen tips were brought into homes and hung top-down from the ceiling. They were often decorated with apples, gilded nuts and red paper strips. Edible ornaments became so popular on Christmas trees that they were often called "sugar trees."

Back in colonial, Williamsburg times, people decorated their trees with greenery, pine, holly berries, magnolia leaves, pine cones, red berries, and mistletoe, according to Billye Chabot,



Creating wreaths decorated in natural materials like dried fruits, flowers, pinecones, popcorn and cranberries, herbs or even feathers. Photos taken at Stokoe Farms in Scottsville.

executive director of the Seward House in Auburn, home of William H. Seward, former secretary of state under President Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson. Fruits such as apples, oranges, lemons and limes were also popular items.

"Later on in the 1800s, they got a little more elaborate with decorations, using peacock feathers, guinea hen feathers and dried hydrangeas," Chabot said.

To replicate snow, people used cotton. According to the NCTA, the first accounts of using lighted candles as decorations on Christmas Trees come from France in the 18th century. Elaborate mass-produced decorations didn't come about until after the Industrial Revolution, according to Chabot. She said she thinks people are going back to using more natural elements when it comes to sprucing up their tree.

"I think we're bombarded all the time with stimulus, computers, constant television, the media, that we want to see more natural things around us."

Judy Fulmer, an Ontario County master gardener, chairs a committee of gardeners who make wreaths using grapevines, and then decorated them in natural ingredients as a fundraiser for the Granger Homestead in Canandaigua.

"Everyone goes into the outdoors, walking in the country and looks for natural materials to decorate the wreaths," she said. "Between people's gardens and the great wild, and friends who have special plants in their yards, we gather the materials."

The gardeners use everything from

stalks of grains and decorative grasses to dried herbs such as rosemary, lavender, mint and thyme. She suggests people can dry flowers or seed pods to use as decorations. She's even used silica gel to preserve flowers and soaked fall leaves in glycerin to preserve them for their Christmas decorations.

At Stokoe Farms in Scottsville, you can shop their 80-acre farm for a real tree and, then, check out their wide-variety of handmade wreaths adorned in all-natural ingredients for inspiration. Suzanne Stokoe said you can decorate using grasses like giant fox tail, milk weed pods painted in gold and silver, and Reindeer moss, soaked in water, which makes giant white puff balls.

Using parts of your shrubs, juniper, cedar, boxwood, white pine, you can give the tree a textured green look. Weeds can even provide good decorations, like the yellow colored yarrow or velvet leaf seed pods.

"Look around you," she said. "What's in your fencerow, whatever happens to be growing, just make sure it'll be a sturdy decoration that will last through the season."

Natural decorations may take more time, but many are free, such as pine cones and berries. Then there's the fun tradition of stringing popcorn and cranberries with a needle and thread.

"It's very economical when you can just walk in your backyard and harvest some fox grass," Stokoe said. "It's not the commercial, shiny, plastic, paper Christmas from the store. It's something you've collected and made."

For more information about real Christmas trees, visit <http://www.christmastree.org>.