

Pining for a Traditional Holiday

Paul Hetzler, ISA Certified Arborist

Speaking as a guy who can hide his own Easter eggs and still not find them all, I marvel how Father Christmas, who is quite a bit older than I am, still manages to keep track of all those kids and their presents. It is our good fortune that the most enduring memories are those associated with smell. Were it not for fragrant evergreen wreaths, trees and garlands, and possibly a whiff of reindeer dung, Santa might have long ago forgotten his holiday duties.

The winter holidays are replete with pleasant smells; fresh-baked pies, maybe a stuffed turkey or rum-soaked fruitcake, but of all the memorable aromas of the season, nothing evokes its spirit quite like the smell of fresh-cut pine, spruce or fir. Although most American households which observe Christmas have switched to artificial trees, something like eleven million families still bring home a real tree.

Every type of conifer has its own mixture of sweet-smelling terpenols and esters that account for their “piney woods” fragrance. Some people prefer the smell of a particular tree, possibly one they had as a child. A natural Christmas tree is, among other things, a giant holiday potpourri. No chemistry lab can make a polyvinylchloride tree smell like fresh evergreen.

The origins of the Christmas tree are unclear, but evergreen trees, wreaths, and boughs were used by a number of ancient peoples, including the Egyptians, to symbolize eternal life. In sixteenth-century Germany, Martin Luther apparently helped kindle (so to speak) the custom of the indoor home Christmas tree by bringing an evergreen into his house and decorating it with candles. For centuries, Christmas trees were brought into homes on December 24th and were not removed until after the Christian feast of Epiphany on January 6th.

In terms of regional favorites, the firs – Douglas, balsam, and Fraser – are very popular aromatic evergreens. Grand and concolor fir smell great too. When kept in water, firs all have excellent needle retention.

Pines also keep their needles well. Scots (not Scotch; that’s for Santa) pine outsells our native white pine, possibly because the sturdy Scots can bear quite a load of decorations without its branches drooping. But white pines outsmell Scots pines, in case a deeper fragrance is important to you.

Not only do spruces have stout branches, they tend to have a strongly pyramidal shape as compared to pines. Spruces don’t have as much perfume as firs or pines have, though. Many folks favor spruces because their short needles make them easy to decorate.

The annual pilgrimage to choose a real tree together is for many families, mine included, a cherished holiday tradition, a time to bond. I look back fondly on our customary thermos of hot chocolate; the ritual of the kids losing at least one mitten, and the time-honored squabble – I mean discussion – regarding which tree is best. Good smells and good memories.

Not only are Christmas trees a renewable resource, they boost the local economy. Even if you don’t have the time to cut your own from a Christmas tree grower, do yourself a favor this year and purchase a natural tree from a local vendor, who can help you select the best kind for your preferences and also let you know how fresh they are. Some trees at large retail outlets were cut weeks, if not months, before they show up at stores.

For the best fragrance and needle retention, cut a one- to two-inch “cookie” from the base before placing your tree in the stand, and fill the reservoir every two days. Research indicates that products claiming to extend needle life don’t work, so save your money. Tree lights with LED bulbs don’t dry out the needles like the old style did, and are easier on your electric bill too.

Whatever your traditions, I hope your family, friends, and evergreens are all well-hydrated, sweet-scented and a source of good memories this holiday season.

Paul Hetzler has been an ISA-Certified Arborist since 1996, and is a member of the Canadian Institute of Forestry and the Society of American Foresters. His book “Shady Characters: Plant Vampires, Caterpillar Soup, Leprechaun Trees and Other Hilarities of the Natural World,” is available on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).