



Tree Time

There's no wrong choice when it comes to picking a Christmas tree

BY ROBIN ROENKER

It's a timeless holiday question — real tree or artificial? Turns out, there are advantages to both.

Opting for artificial offers the freedom to start decorating as early as you please — no worries about drying needles — and to set up several trees throughout your house, thanks to the >

many sizes available on the market, from miniature table-toppers to 10-foot-plus centerpieces.

"I put my trees up so early, I could never have a real one," explains Jodi Pirkl, a realtor in Bismarck, N.D., who starts decorating her three large trees and dozen or more small trees that fill all the rooms of her home every year on Nov. 1. "The best compliment someone could give me is to walk in my house and say, 'It looks like Christmas threw up in here,'" Pirkl jokes.

Some love the magic of their artificial trees so much, they keep them up nearly year-round. In Biloxi, Miss., Amy Rosonet LeBert's tree stays up well past Christmas so she can switch out ornaments and use the tree as a centerpiece in her décor for other holidays. "My favorite thing is the lights. Being in a room with the Christmas tree — or Mardi Gras or Easter tree — just brings a warmth to my house that just doesn't feel the same when the tree is down," she says.

If you opt for a real tree, to delay the needles drying out, choose lights that produce low heat, such as LEDs.

SOURCE: National Christmas Tree Association

Artificial trees also lend themselves to fun trends: dressing an all-white tree as a snowman or having themed mini trees that kids can adopt as their own. Plus, there are artificial trees to fit every style — whether you're looking for a hot pink showstopper, modern minimalist design or one so lifelike your guests will swear it's real.

"Mimicking nature is what people love us for, and it's why we exist as a brand," says Balsam Hill CEO Thomas Harman. "Making our trees more and more realistic is something we obsess over, and it's my passion."

For natural tree devotees, though, no artificial branches, no matter how realistic, can ever replace the experience of picking out the real thing. Real trees spread that classic, natural evergreen smell throughout the home, often for the whole holiday season. They can also be sustainably mulched or recycled for firewood — or even repurposed as fish habitats in local lakes (check with your city) after the holidays are done.

For many families, the annual trip to a tree farm is one of the key traditions that help make the holidays so special. Alicen Limestoll of Andover, Ohio, and her four children — ranging in age from 12 to their 20s — make time to gather for a family trek to the same northern Ohio tree farm they've



been visiting since the kids were small. Now that her oldest son is stationed at an Army base in Anchorage, Alaska, and her daughter has started college, the chance to reconnect this winter while enjoying hot cocoa among the evergreens will be even more special. "It's always been such a nice outing for our family," says Limestoll, who makes her tree last well into January by watering it overnight in the bathtub before decorating.

"There's a completely different Christmas experience a family has if they go to get a real tree, as opposed to dragging a box out of the basement or attic or garage," says Tim O'Connor, executive director of the National Christmas Tree Association, a trade group that promotes the benefits of farm-grown trees.

Perhaps so. But whether you opt for real or artificial, there's no debating one holiday truth: Christmas trees are magical. ■

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TRENDING TREES

Who says trees have to be green — or even reserved for Christmas? These artificial options just might be for you:



A MODERN TWIST

For those looking for something different — or the perfect way to showcase ornaments — **ModernChristmasTrees.com** uses minimalistic designs, such as a series of rings for the branches, to create the tree shape. The company offers freestanding trees as well as wall-hanging and tabletop varieties.



RETRO HIP

Treetopia offers artificial trees in an array of colors, from black or white to purple and hot pink — and beyond — suitable for a variety of personal styles, and adaptable to match any holiday. Particularly hot this year: metallic trees that evoke the look of aluminum trees of the 1950s and 1960s, but in safer, modern styles that incorporate LED lights, says company spokesperson Tami Kelly.



RATCHET UP THE REAL

If you want the convenience of an artificial tree that looks as if it's freshly cut, **Balsam Hill** CEO Thomas Harman suggests the company's Yukon Spruce — it's the one he has in his own home. "It looks like it just came from a forest, and it's so on trend," he says.

— Robin Roenker

CARING FOR A REAL TREE

Prefer a real tree? Follow these tips from the National Christmas Tree Association to keep it looking green and fresh throughout the holiday season:

- ▶ Before putting the tree in the stand, make a fresh cut to remove a ½-inch-thick disk of wood from the base of the trunk to help ensure the tree intakes water.
- ▶ Be sure to display the tree in a stand that provides at least 1 quart of water per inch of stem diameter.
- ▶ Water the tree thoroughly when you first bring it home, and keep the water level above the base of the tree at all times.
- ▶ Keep the tree away from fireplaces, heaters and other direct sources of heat.