



To Tree or Not to Tree, Real or Artificial?

by Marilyn Loser

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We tromped through the wintry forest up Rock Creek and cut a wonderful Christmas tree for the first time in several years. We picked (permit in hand) a “Charlie Brown” tree so others in the clump can prosper in future years. My “to tree” decision has to do with being here this holiday season.

Dr. Kim Garchar, ASC alum, college professor and cat lover, posted on Facebook regarding her dilemma. Last year her climbing cats toppled a tree even with a toggle hook in the ceiling to secure the tree. I can’t offer her help, but remember when we contemplated hanging our tree from the cathedral ceiling in our small house. I couldn’t get over the idea I was lynching the tree.

Already many Alamosans are displaying their trees and they’re beautiful! I like to wait a bit longer. I worry a bit about keeping my tree fresh. Wood stove + dry pine needles = potential fire hazard.

This is not meant to be a scare tactic, rather a cautionary note. We’re having a colder start to our winter than in recent years. As I write, the Alamosa overnight temperature is forecast to plummet to -23 F. I imagine people will be burning more fires this December to keep their homes warm.

So what to do? First, make sure your tree is not close to your fireplace or wood-burning stove. Second, make sure to keep your tree as hydrated as possible. When I was a kid, many people just nailed the bottom of the tree to a pair of crossed boards – no tree watering was possible in this case. Now, I think most people use a tree stand with a water reservoir. You just have to make sure you keep it filled!

I checked out various methods for preserving Christmas tree needles beyond the common sense ideas above. Many suggest cutting off an inch from the bottom of the tree if it’s not freshly cut – the idea being this will remove a dried seal that prevents the tree from absorbing water. Others suggest spraying the tree (outside) with a clear film that slows water loss from the needles. People use this on outdoor evergreens in the winter with varying degrees of success. I encourage you to contact your local gardening center about this approach. Another form of preventing water loss from the needles is to use hairspray. However, this could make the tree more flammable (Who has hairspray these days?).

Other ideas. 1) Some sources suggest making a concoction of bleach, white corn syrup, and hot water. I could find no evidence that this helps. Myth Busters (see their .com site) suggested bleach may prevent some needle loss, but resulted in a sickly looking tree. 2) Add vodka to the tree water. New one to me! Ehow.com says adding alcohol to the water may thin lacquers and trees resins, but that it also tends to dry the tree out. Further, do you have small children or critters that may explore the water under the tree? Hmm! 3) Add nitric oxide (from Viagra). Myth Busters said this was plausible. I’m not making this up and I’m not going there.

In the future, we may have a commercial product that helps block ethylene production. Scientists from the Nova Scotia Agricultural College and Université Laval, said ethylene is the prime culprit that makes needles fall away. There are products for nurseries on the market, such as SmartFresh, which help maintain the freshness of cut flowers using this technology. For my organic readers, I'm not sure this would be better than pure water.

Bottom line, I believe getting a tree as fresh as possible, keeping it away from heat sources, and making sure it gets plenty of water is the best bet.

Perhaps you're thinking of an artificial tree. I know many people who love theirs. If you think this is healthier for you and the planet, or less expensive than a real tree, you should check out <http://www.christmastree.org/myths.cfm>. I believe this site is funded by those who grow fresh trees. However, they make some good points.

A "fake" tree usually lasts 6 – 9 years and then will fill up the land fill rather than biodegrading. And you have to store and dust it each year. Artificial trees aren't fire proof.

I also like their response to those who feel falling needles are a hassle: "Don't you vacuum anyway?" What about tree allergies? Some people actually do have tree allergies, but these are usually due to pollen which a tree is unlikely to produce in the winter.

I'm looking forward to placing new and old ornaments on our tree. A tradition I love. Whatever choice you make, I hope you have a wonderful winter season.

"The perfect Christmas tree? All Christmas trees are perfect!" Charles N. Barnard