
Acreage Living

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The Iowa Christmas Tree

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Each year in the United States, more than 35 million Christmas trees are harvested. This tradition, dating back to the 16th century in Strasbourg, Germany, (now part of France) has continued and thrived into the 21st century. The first retail offering of the Christmas tree was in New York City in 1851. Each year since 1966, the National Christmas Tree Association provides the first family with a fresh, renewable tree.

Christmas trees are renewable, unlike their artificial counterparts made of petroleum or plastic. In fact, each year more than 59 percent of trees sold are recycled by community programs into useful mulch for our flowers and trees. They also are renewable because every spring growers plant more than 56 million new seedlings. For more information, visit the National Christmas Tree Growers Association's website at <http://www.nalchristmastrees.org/>.

Iowa has approximately 200 growers, producing trees both for retail lots and choose-and-cut operations. Popular species include Scotch pine, white pine, red pine, balsam fir, and Fraser fir. For the grower, the sale season is not the only busy time of the year. Growing Christmas trees is a year-round

plan of action. For a list of Iowa growers, visit the Iowa Department of Agriculture's website at <http://www2.state.ia.us/agriculture/xmastreedirec.htm>.

Trees must be planted every year. Starting in the fall, growers do site preparation for planting and use tillage or herbicides to remove competing grasses and weeds. They also contact nurseries to order their planting stock. In April, trees are either planted by hand or by machine. Hand planting involves using tree planting bars, shovels, or spades to plant the trees, making sure they are planted straight and at the right depth to produce a high quality tree. After planting, growers must apply a layer of organic mulch for weed control or use one of the registered herbicides to prevent weed and grass competition during the growing season. Weed control is required every year on every tree until they are marketed.

During much of the spring and summer the trees must be monitored for insect and disease problems. Common insect pests for the Iowa grower include pine needle scale and European sawfly; common diseases are brown spot and Lophoderium needlecast. In addition, growers face other biologi-

cal obstacles including deer, gophers, ground squirrels, mice, and voles. Birds cause deformed leaders by perching on them as they expand in the spring. Weather and climate also have impacts including damage from too little or too much precipitation, winds, ice, and snow.

Newly planted trees may require staking to correct leaning trees and to correct multiple leaders during their first three years. In June and July, starting two to four years after planting, each tree is sheared to control growth, shape, density, and form. Growers may thin the number of shoots in each tree and control the expansion of the leader to produce trees that have desirable density of leaves and branches. Terminal growth is limited to develop trees with greater density and symmetry. Trees are shaped with either shearing knives or mechanical shears or trimmers to produce that ideal shape for a Christmas tree, which is twice as high as wide. Quality shearing produces quality trees and is one of the most important cultural practices in the production of Christmas trees; it also is the most labor intensive cultural treatment. Growers also may basal prune each tree, allowing for easier harvesting and providing a branch-free handle for the consumer.

Some species of trees produced in Iowa require

an application of a tint and antidesiccant to maintain their good green color during the Christmas season. These dyes are normally applied with mist blowers or hand sprayers during September to November.

Starting in October, growers get ready to market their product. Most Iowa trees are sold in the field as choose-and-cut operations. These trees are tagged, graded, and priced. Christmas tree growers are responsible for advertising their product, providing access to the plantings, and helping the consumer harvest the "perfect" tree. This may involve providing shakers to help remove old needles, or Christmas tree bags or bailers to get the tree home and into the house. Wholesale growers are usually responsible for harvesting each tree, shaking, bailing the tree and, in many cases, delivering the trees to retail lots in towns and communities.

After Christmas, growers are allowed a little rest before the process starts over again. This year as you decorate and enjoy your natural, renewable Christmas tree remember it involves a lot more than planting and harvesting that tree seven to 12 years later. Give your grower an extra smile and a pat on the back for a job well done. Enjoy your Iowa grown natural Christmas tree.

Trying to Stay Warm This Winter?

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Meeting the challenge of keeping warm this winter can be a difficult task. One way to help fight off the cold is by purchasing a new blanket.

When you shop, remember to consider not only cost, but also warmth, durability, and care requirements. The market place offers a wide variety of blankets and consumers should have no problem finding a blanket that suits their needs.

The warmth of a blanket is determined by its thickness, resilience and fiber content.

Benefits of the different types of blankets will vary depending on each specific blanket. For example, cotton thermal-weave blankets are washable, very durable, and warm with an additional blanket placed on top. Vellux blankets are velvet-like and very lightweight, yet warm. They are washable, but don't wear as long as other types of blankets.

Wool blankets are probably the most costly, but also the most durable. Care is critical to how well they perform.

Polartec® blankets or throws of nonwoven polyester that offer thickness and warmth because of the loft and resilience of the fiber are widely available this year. They come in a variety of bright colors.

For warmth without weight, down-filled comforters are available at upscale prices; the coverings must be closely woven to prevent down and

feathers from sneaking out. Similar appearance and warmth can be found with a polyester fiberfill comforter of equal weight, usually at a lower price.

If considering an electric blanket, consumers need to consider safety issues and precautions before making a purchase. Electrical fires have occurred when good safety precautions were not followed.

For more information on textiles and clothing, contact the local county office of ISU Extension or access the website at <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/>.

Home Fire Safety

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According to the National Fire Protection Association, last year there were 386,000 home fires in the United States resulting in 3,420 deaths, 16,975 injuries, and 5.5 billion dollars in property damage. Data collected by the association over the past five years indicates that January was the peak month for home fire deaths, followed by February and December. Smoking was the leading cause of home fire deaths overall, but in the months of December, January, and February, smoking and heating equipment caused similar shares of fire deaths. Cooking was the leading cause of home fires and home fire injuries year-round.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPS) presents this checklist as a safety guide to spot possible fire safety problems which may be present in your home.

Supplemental Home Heating Devices (wood-burning stoves, fireplaces, kerosene heaters, gas-fired heaters and electric heaters) are involved in about 22 percent of all residential fires. These fires kill more than 600 people. There are also thousands of contact burn injuries and hundreds of carbon monoxide poisonings.

- Inspect your heating stove twice monthly. Have chimneys inspected and cleaned by a professional chimney sweep.
- Use a floor protector that extends 18 inches beyond the stove on all sides.
- Keep all combustible materials (drapes, furniture, firewood, etc.) at least three feet away from any heater.
- Never use gasoline or other flammable liquids to start wood fires.
- Keep rooms with unvented gas or kerosene heaters ventilated (e.g. door open or window ajar).
- If you must use an extension cord with your electric heater, make sure it is marked with a power rating at least as high as that of the heater itself. Do not permit the cord to become buried under carpeting or rugs.
- Never operate heaters unattended or while you are sleeping.

Cooking equipment (both gas and electric) is associated with more than 100,000 fires annually, involving 400 deaths and 5,000 injuries.

- Roll up or fasten long loose sleeves with pins or elastic bands while cooking.

- Keep constant vigilance on any cooking that is required above the "keep warm" setting.
- Never place or store pot holders, plastic utensils, towels, and other non-cooking equipment on or near the range.

Each year more than 200 deaths are associated with fires started by cigarette lighters. About two-thirds of these result from children playing with lighters. Most victims are under five years old.

- Keep lighters and matches out of sight and out of the reach of children.
- Always check to see that cigarettes are extinguished before emptying ashtrays.
- Look for furniture designed to reduce the likelihood of furniture fire from cigarettes.

Look for the gold colored tag on furniture that states – "Important Consumer Safety Information from UFAC."

- Always check the furniture where smokers have been sitting for improperly discarded smoking materials.
- DO NOT smoke in bed.

Many fire deaths and fire injuries are actually caused by smoke and gases. Survival depends on being warned as early as possible and having an escape plan.

- Install smoke detectors on every level of your home and near all sleeping areas.
- Establish and practice a family plan for escape, including an established safe meeting place.
- Post the fire department phone number by every phone.

For more information on fire safety, contact the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission hotline at (800) 638-2772 or visit their web site at <http://www.cpsc.gov>.

Iowa Hay and Straw Directory

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The Agricultural Marketing Bureau of the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) is compiling its 26th edition of the Iowa Hay and Straw Directory. This directory lists Iowa producers with hay and straw for sale, as well as organizations and businesses associated with promoting and marketing quality hay. The annual hardcopy of this directory is updated and available each January free to interested buyers in Iowa and surrounding states. Producer names are gathered throughout the year with added emphasis now just before the hardcopy is printed.

Sections within the Hay and Straw Directory include "Forage for Sale," "Testing Labs", "Forage Auctions," and "Forage Brokers"

If you would like your name added or a hardcopy of this directory, call 1-800-383-5079. A copy of the directory can also be found at your county ISU Extension office. Names received after the hardcopy is published are added on a monthly basis to the Internet version that can be found at this Internet address: <http://www2.state.ia.us/agriculture/haydir.htm>

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