

Using a Live Tree for Holiday Cheer

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Planting a live Christmas tree in your landscape after the holidays can provide for a unique specimen. However, a living tree with its balled roots does require extra care and planning. The first step is to select the planting site. You should consider the mature height and spread of the tree. This is important since some species used for Christmas trees will grow to be 40 to 50 feet tall. Make sure it is planted in an area where it will not intrude on power lines or your home. The success you have in keeping the tree growing after Christmas depends on the care you give it while it is in your home. When you first bring it home, keep it in an unheated, sheltered area, such as a garage or porch. It should be located out of the wind and sun. Plan to keep the tree in the house for no more than two weeks. Place the tree indoors in as cool a location as possible. Keep it out of drafts and away from heating vents. Provide as much natural light as possible. Place the root ball or container in an attractive tub lined with heavy plastic to protect the floor from moisture. This will make watering easier. Water the tree only when the soil starts to dry out. Keep the root ball slightly damp, but not flooded. Decorate the tree with care. If you use lights, use those that do not give off any heat. Heat will damage the growing needles.

After the holidays, readjust the tree to outdoor temperatures by placing it back on the sheltered porch or in the garage for several days. When you are ready to plant your tree, dig a hole that is the same depth but wider than the root ball. A good rule of thumb is to dig a hole at least three times the diameter of the root ball. Before you put the tree into the hole, check to see whether it is balled in natural or synthetic burlap. To determine which type has been used, remove a small piece of the burlap and hold a match to it. As a rule, natural burlap will burn, synthetic will melt. Synthetic burlap does not decompose in the soil and can girdle roots as they expand through the material. It must be totally removed. Pull the burlap away from the sides of the root ball, tip the root ball to one side and push the burlap underneath it as far as possible. Then tip the root ball to the other side and slide the burlap out from under. Natural burlap is biodegradable and can be left along the sides and bottom of the root ball. You should remove the burlap from the top of the root ball where it is subject to drying out. Dry burlap repels water, making it difficult to rewet the root ball. In poorly-drained areas remove the natural burlap entirely, if possible, to prevent it from holding too much moisture near the roots.

Trees grown in plastic or other hard-sided containers can be removed from their containers and placed directly in the holes prepared for them. Cut any circling roots so that they will not strangle the tree later on. If a tree or shrub is pot-bound, use pruning shears or a serrated knife to make slices one to two inches deep going from the top of the root ball to the bottom. Make these slices in three or four places around the root ball. Roots will regenerate from behind the cut. Next, pull the roots growing along the outside away from the root ball. The soil used to fill in around the root ball of the newly planted tree is called backfill. The loosened original soil from the planting hole is the best backfill. Loosen and break up any clods of soil before backfilling. Clods in the backfill create undesirable air pockets around the root ball and could hinder root growth and establishment. Backfill the bottom half of the space around the root ball. Tamp the soil lightly with your foot, but do not tamp so much that you compact the soil. Finish filling the hole with loose, unamended soil, and gently tamp again. The soil can be settled by pushing a hose with running water in and out of the backfill soil all around the hole. Mulch over the top of the root ball with a two to three-inch layer of mulch. Again, water only as needed because a flooded tree may die. Initially the root ball will need to be watered directly because roots haven't yet spread into the surrounding soil. Construct a three-inch-high water ring around the edge of the root ball to hold irrigation water. Water rings should be removed by the end of the second growing season. If it is absolutely necessary to stake the tree to prevent it from tipping over during the first few months, secure the tree trunk to a support stake at the lowest position which will hold the trunk erect. In the spring, remove the stake to see if the tree can stand on its own.