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Christmas Tree Buying Guide

by [Katie Kretschmer](#), Posted Dec 3rd 2010 6:00AM
Filed under: [Christmas](#), [Decorations](#)

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This year's White House Christmas tree is a Douglas fir. Credit: Getty Images

At my house, we'll hang a wreath on the door and swag the mantle with [garland](#) over Thanksgiving, but the tree doesn't enter the house till Christmas Eve. However, for most families in the U.S., this weekend and next weekend are the peak times to bring home the tree.

When it comes to choosing a Christmas tree, one man's Charlie Brown special is another man's perfect tannenbaum. "Beauty is very much in the eye of the beholder," says Dick Moore, who owns and operates a tree farm in Lansing, NY, and is president of the [National Christmas Tree Association](#) (NCTA). "We had a tree that grew a double trunk and sort of split in half, and we didn't think anyone would want it. But one customer said it was perfect for her small apartment because the flat side meant she could put it up against the wall."

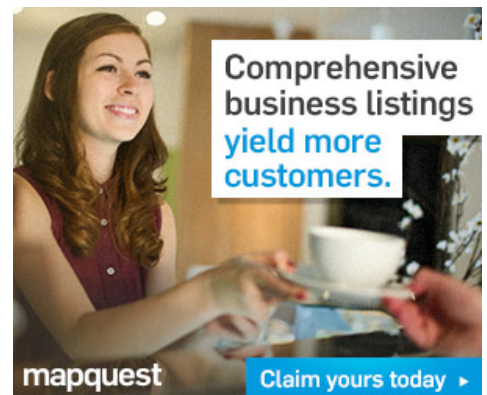
While size, shape and fullness are the most important factors in choosing a tree, it's hard to pin down any

one type of tree as the most popular, according to John Frampton, a professor in the Department of Forestry and Environmental Resources at North Carolina State University whose expertise is Christmas tree genetics and breeding.

So which tree is right for you? That depends on what you want from your tree.

Virginia pine

Generally, Frampton and Moore agree that the longest-lasting tree is the freshest tree, so local species tend to be favorites on their home turf. "Trees like the [Virginia pine](#) are very popular in the south east, because that's where they are from, but they aren't usually shipped very far," says Frampton.



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Douglas fir

The [Douglas fir](#) (which is not a true fir) is native to the Pacific Northwest, but has always been shipped all over. It's now also being grown in the east, and is considered by many to be a classic choice, but is not local to most markets. This year's White House Christmas tree is a Douglas fir, grown in Pennsylvania.

Balsam and Fraser firs

If you're looking for a good smelling tree, think about a [Balsam](#) or [Fraser](#). Native to the northeast and Canada, the Balsam is said by some to keep its fragrance longest. The Fraser fir is closely related to the Balsam, but grows only in the southern Appalachians. The true firs tend to be popular choices as pre-cut trees because they have "better keepability," according to Frampton. That means they maintain their freshness and hold their needles better and longer than other species when they are cut and shipped. According to the NCTA, 78 percent of the trees sold last year were pre-cut, and depending on how far they are shipped and how long they are on the lot before being sold, keepability is key.

Noble fir

Have a big collection of decorations for the tree? The [Noble fir](#), which grows primarily in the Pacific Northwest, has stiff branches good for heavy ornaments. The Noble fir, like the Balsam, Fraser, is among the best known-and most widely available variety. All three are known for their symmetrical shape and good color.

When it comes to the classic Christmas tree form, Frampton says tastes have changed over the years, with preferences moving toward fuller trees with dense branches, and away from the more European, open tree, and growers groom trees to suit that demand. Moore explains that shearing, the trimming process used by tree farmers to enhance shape and promote healthy growth and fullness, varies by grower preference, but agrees that the trend is toward a more solid look.

For a full list of tree types, visit the [National Christmas Tree Association web site](#).

Personal preferences aside, there are some key things to keep in mind as you set out:

Measure Twice

There are two important measurements to take into consideration before you head out the door to buy a tree. Height is obvious. As a rule of thumb, Moore says to go for a tree that's 6 to 12 inches shorter than your ceiling height. "You need to allow room for the stand, and also keep in mind the height of your tree topper," he says.

But don't forget about the diameter. To gauge your needs, center your stand where you plan to put your tree and measure from the center of the stand to where you want your tree to reach. Double that to get the diameter. And keep in mind you may need to go for a shorter tree if space is at a premium: Depending on how a tree has been sheared, a 10-foot tree will be from 4 to 8 feet wide.

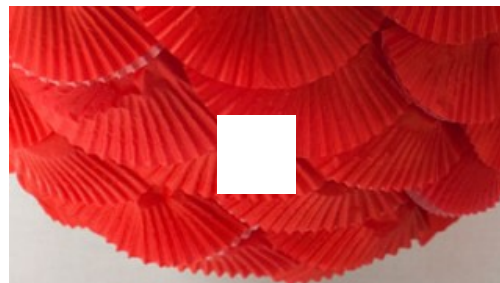
Store-bought

If you are getting your tree pre-cut from a seasonal retail lot, check for freshness. Moore says a good test is to run your hand backward along a branch and see if a lot of needles come off. Another test is to bend a needle. On firs, fresh needles will snap crisply (like a fresh carrot). Also look for too many brown or discolored needles and broken branches.

Avoid buying a tree that's already baled (bound up in net or rope for easier transport), because you can't see the shape. And always have the retailer give you a fresh cut at the bottom, and get the tree into water as soon as possible to ensure a longer-lasting tree.

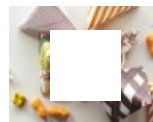
Cut your own

If you are planning to buy your tree from a choose-and-cut farm, freshness won't be an issue. But Moore says there are a few things you can do while still at the farm to increase your enjoyment of your tree. Have the farmer give the bottom a straight cut (usually the cut made to



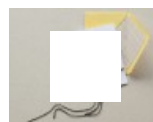
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fell the tree is not even) so the tree will stand level. "Also have him cut some of the lower branches off so there's room for the tree stand, and space to pile up presents," he says. Finally, before the farmer runs the tree through the baler, have him put the tree in the shaker. "Giving the tree a good shake not only gets the old needles out, it gets out the birds' nests and grass that naturally get into trees on the farm," Moore explains.

Care and feeding

Once you get the tree home, be a good host and offer it a drink right away. Keeping your tree hydrated is the best way to keep it fresh through the holidays. "When it dries out, it will start losing needles," says Moore. If you aren't putting it up right away, store your tree in a bucket of water in a cool, dry spot. If the trunk has been out of water for more than four hours, the end will seal. You'll need to cut a fresh end or it won't drink and will begin to dry out. If it goes dry in the stand, you won't be able to give it a new end, so remember to add water often.

"Most people use a stand that's too small," says Frampton. "Your stand should hold as much water as possible." He advises a quart of water for each inch of diameter at the base of the trunk. That's about a gallon of water for a four-inch trunk. And for the first couple days, you will likely need to refill daily. What about plant food or aspirin? "Nothing like that is needed, just plain water," he says. Also, the NCTA's tip sheet says not to whittle down the trunk to fit into the stand; this reduces the trees ability to take in water, which is what keeps it fresh.

Given plenty of water, your tree should last through the holidays even if you bought it before the Thanksgiving table was cleared. But no matter how early you put it up, please -- take it down before Valentine's Day.

Get more [tips on taking care of your tree from DIYLife](#). And we've got the inside scoop on [how Christmas tree pricing works!](#)

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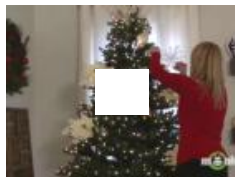
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