

Living Christmas tree is your gift to the environment

by Mary James

Living Christmas trees are "green" - no questions asked.

But are they the best pick for you - and the tree?

TREES FOR SALE - David Ross of Walter Andersen Nursery stands among some of the living Christmas trees for sale at the nursery's San Diego location. As an option to evergreen trees, consider tree-shaped rosemary and holiday-blooming camellias. CNS Photo by John Gibbons. CHOOSING A TREE - To ensure your tree lives a long time in your home, make a fresh cut to remove about one-half-inch from the base of the trunk before putting the tree in the stand. How do you recognize the different trees? Look at the needles. From left are: 'Fat Albert' blue spruce, Deodar cedar, Aleppo pine and a Monterey pine. (CNS Photos by John Gibbons. "Be sure you know the potential of the tree before you buy it and plant it," advises David Ross of Walter Andersen Nursery. "Many of them become very large and can overwhelm a house or yard.")

Also living trees are outdoor plants, so their time indoors should be brief - ideally a week or less, Ross adds. Indoors, put them near a window or other bright spot and water them daily. "It's warm and dry inside and these are big plants. You don't want them to dry out," he says.

After the holidays, it's best to plant the tree in the ground, rather than a container. "Don't count on using them year after year as your Christmas tree," said Bent Petersen, green goods buyer for Armstrong Garden Centers. "They need to be sheared and they are difficult to grow in a container."

As the tree grows, most won't look like the conical Christmas tree. "Some will grow to be pretty open and irregular," Ross says.

With these caveats, both still applaud the concept. "I have memories as a kid ... getting a seedling, planting it outside and watching it grow," Ross says. Plus, Petersen adds, "a living tree is just a nice thing and you're doing good for the environment."

Here are Ross' and Petersen's picks of living trees suited to Southern California's Mediterranean-type climate. Sizes range from 2 to 7 feet tall; prices are \$15 to \$140. Stocks tend to be limited, so both recommend shopping early in the season.

- Afghan pine (*Pinus eldarica*) - Drought, wind and heat tolerant; good throughout the county, except in areas where oaks are plentiful. Grows 20 to 50 feet tall; 25 feet wide. Dark green long needles.

- Aleppo pine (*Pinus halepensis*) - A Mediterranean region native that grows 30 to 60 feet tall and 20 to 40 feet wide. Irregular growth especially in windy coastal areas. Light green needles.

- Monterey pine (*Pinus radiata*) - A central California native that can grow 6 feet a year when young, soaring to 100 feet tall, 25 to 35 feet wide. Bright green needles.

- Deodar cedar (*Cedrus deodara*) - Rapid growing to 80 feet tall, 40 feet wide. Graceful branching. Not suited to small lawns. Green foliage may be tinged with blue, silver or golden yellow.

- "Tiny Tower" cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens* 'Monshel') - Dwarf Italian cypress grows to 8 feet tall, 2 feet wide in its first decade. At maturity, it can reach 30 feet tall and 3 feet wide. Dense blue-green foliage. Requires no shearing.

- "Fat Albert" blue spruce (*Picea pungens glauca* 'Fat Albert') - Slow growing to 10 to 15 feet tall. Classic

pyramidal shape. Striking blue-tinged foliage.

- Italian Stone pine (*Pinus pinea*) - Often one of the smallest living Christmas trees sold, this pine eventually grows 40 to 80 feet tall and 40 to 60 feet wide. Not for small gardens. Needles are bright green to gray-green. Suited for beaches and inland heat. Source of pine nuts.

CHRISTMAS TREE CARE

Tips from the National Christmas Tree Association:

- Make a fresh cut to remove about 1/2 inch from the base of the trunk before putting the tree in the stand.
- Place the tree in water as soon as possible.
- The stand should be large enough to hold 1 quart of water per inch of stem diameter.
- Keep displayed trees away from sources of heat - vents, fireplaces, direct sunlight.
- Check the water level in the stand daily to be sure the water level doesn't dip below the base of the tree.

- Using lights that produce low heat, such as miniature lights, can slow drying of the tree.

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