

Christmas Trees

By David Falkenham, Extension Educator, Forestry and Wildlife Resources

The Thanksgiving craziness is behind us and now it's time to settle in, roll up our sleeves and get ready for the bulk of the Holiday season. Have you taken care of the most important Holiday event? Which event is that you might ask? The Christmas tree of course, when the tree is up the holiday's can really begin! My wife and I took the black lab for a tree cutting date the Friday after Thanksgiving ... I call it "Green Friday".

Whenever I scan my memory banks to past Holidays, it is always the memory of the glowing tree in the living room that stays with me, every other memory is fuzzy, but the Christmas tree sticks. My earliest memories of cutting down a Christmas tree come from Jefferson, New Hampshire on a Tree Farm once owned by an elderly Austrian man and his German wife. They had very thick accents that somehow seemed to enhance the experience. After what seemed like hours of tromping through the snow looking for the perfect tree, my father, sisters and I would return triumphant in our annual conquest and the elderly couple would treat us to hot chocolate and cookies and of course wine for my dad.

Fittingly, my research on the history of the Christmas tree takes me to Germany and Scandinavia; where late in the Middle Ages the people would place evergreen trees inside their homes to show their hope in the forthcoming spring. These early traditions gave rise to our modern Christmas tree. According to legend the first stories of decorating trees came from a German man named Martin Luther who was awestruck by the beauty of the snow covered evergreens near his home. On his walk one evening he was so enchanted by the moonlight reflecting through the snowy forest that he returned home, cut down an evergreen tree and placed it in his home to share the story with his children. He then decorated the tree with candles which he lit in celebration of Christmas. By the 1700's, the decorated Christmas tree was well established in Germany, France and Austria.

This tradition likely crossed the Atlantic into America with German immigrants and Hessian Soldiers during the American Revolution. Legend has it (there is often a fine line between legend and history), that a celebration around a Christmas tree on a bitter cold Christmas Eve at Trenton, New Jersey may have turned the tide for American colonial forces in 1776. As the story goes, Hessian Mercenaries were so reminded of home by a decorated evergreen that they abandoned their guard posts to eat, drink and be merry. General George Washington attacked that evening and defeated them.

Early condemnation by Puritans slowed the spread of the tradition in the United States. Even as late as 1851 a Cleveland minister nearly lost his job because he allowed a tree in the church. Despite all of this the tradition has grown with

steady acceptance. Today the Christmas tree business is internationally recognized, as can be noted this time of year by the dozens of tractor trailer loads of trees headed south.

When it comes to choosing your tree, it really is a matter of personal preference. There are many species to choose from, Scotch pine, Balsam fir and Frasier fir are the most common in New England. The best advice that I can give about choosing a good Christmas tree is to support your local economy and get your tree from a local Christmas tree producer. There are literally dozens of Christmas tree producers in this area and they all work very hard throughout the year to grow beautiful, fragrant and long lasting Christmas trees. Some producers have "choose-n-cut"; others will cut them and have them on display for you to choose from. Some places even add extra's to the experience by having refreshments in a warm building, sleigh rides, Santa visits...the list is endless.

Regardless of where you go, it will be a great memory builder for the entire family. The small cost of the tree is nothing compared to the expensive Blackberry that you are getting your spouse this year, the memory lasts forever and I guaranty you won't forget to buy batteries. To me the tree, and the experience associated with it, means just a little bit more....