

Alamance Gardener

Alamance County Cooperative Extension Horticulture Department

Coming Events

*Coming in 2015! Look for a
new schedule next month.*



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In Search of the Perfect Tree

Harlan Hall has complicated my life. Before he retired, I didn't have to worry about where I would get my Christmas tree. Now that he has stopped selling trees I have to decide if I will buy a tree locally or go to the mountains and cut one myself. If you are trying to make a similar decision hopefully the following information will be helpful.

The first decision is to determine what species of tree to get for your Christmas tree. Several years ago the decision was easy. You went out to the field behind the barn and cut down a pine or cedar and were done. Now we have several choices including Fraser fir, white pine, Leyland cypress, as well as our native Virginia pine and red cedar.

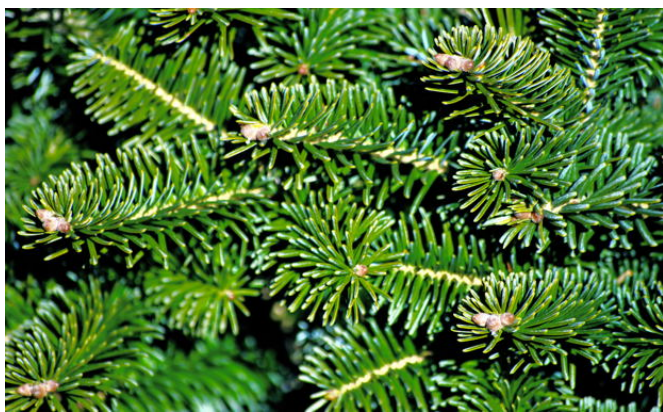
The next decision is whether to get a live tree, a cut tree from a lot, or to cut your own tree at a Christmas tree farm. Live trees are dug from the field and can be planted after the holiday season, but that is something I usually don't recommend. If the tree stays inside too long, gets dry and/or has a root ball that is too small, the tree most likely will not thrive in your landscape. There are of course exceptions to this rule. Over 20 years ago, I planted a Norway spruce in our yard that we had as our Christmas tree when our son Robert was two years old. As you can see it has done very well.



The Christmas Tree Story

The most common cut Christmas tree you'll find is the Fraser fir. It is perhaps the best tree in our part of the country and is native to our mountains. It has good color foliage, strong branches, pleasing aroma and excellent needle retention. It is a slow growing tree that takes about eight years to make a nice seven foot tall tree. The main concern most people have is knowing how to pick a fresh tree.

Look for trees that are displayed in water or in a shady area. A tree that is not fresh will shed needles and can be a fire hazard. A fresh tree will be heavy and the cut stump should be sticky with sap. If the tree is light and the stump is not sticky most likely the tree is dry and will not last long in your home. The needles should be a dark-green color and soft to the touch.



If you want to be sure your Christmas tree is fresh, choose and cut it yourself. Here is the link to the NC Department of Agriculture Farm Fresh website where you can search for choose and cut Christmas tree farms.

<http://www.ncfarmfresh.com/farms.asp>



While there are Christmas tree farms in our area, if you want a Fraser fir you will have to drive to the mountains. Fraser fir grows naturally at elevations above 5,000 feet and does poorly at lower elevations. Most of the local farms grow Leyland cypress, white pine and red cedar.

Once you get your tree back home cut off at least a ½ inch off the trunk so the tree can absorb water more easily. If you need to store the tree for a day or two before bringing it inside, keep it in a

bucket of water in a shady spot. You may also want to spray the tree with the water hose to wash off pollen and dust. Display your tree in a stand that holds at least one gallon of water and check the water level daily. Forget the Christmas tree preservatives, they aren't beneficial and some may

actually be harmful to tree quality. Fresh water and your favorite decorations are all your Christmas tree will need.

If you have any questions about Christmas trees or any other gardening topic, please give me or Chris a call.





December Garden Tips

Go ahead and take cuttings for holiday decorations now. Light pruning of evergreens such as holly and boxwood won't harm them. Those long, trailing grapevines make great wreaths; just be sure to shape your wreath shortly after cutting the vine, before they become dry and hard to manage.

Keep bird feeders clean and filled with seed and suet. Use a hot pot or kettle to melt any ice that forms in birdbaths and change the water at least once a week.

Overwatering is the number one cause of houseplant death in December. Be sure the soil is dry before you water, allow for drainage and save the fertilizer for spring. This goes for that favorite holiday houseplant - the poinsettia - as well. If you observe the watering rules and keep poinsettias in bright, indirect light but away from cold drafts and excessive heat, they will hold on to their cheery, colorful bracts all season.

Fertilize pansies and other hardy annuals and remove spent flowers. Apply a layer of mulch to prevent frost heaving.

Enclose a thoughtful gift in holiday cards. A small envelope of seeds collected from your garden will be appreciated by your gardening friends. Label the envelope with the collection date, the name of the flower and planting instructions.

Whether it's fir, pine cedar or spruce, if yours is a fresh-cut Christmas tree, remember these basics: 1: Make a fresh cut of at least ½ inch from the base before standing the tree in water. No additives necessary, but keep that water reservoir full at all times – the amount of water a fresh-cut evergreen can absorb may shock you. You may need to refill the reservoir more than once each day for the first few days!

Going with a live tree this year? While this is a great time of year to plant a new tree outside, it's not a great time to store a living evergreen

tree indoors. Hot (more than 60 degrees), dry indoor conditions are just bad for a tree's health. Keep your tree's indoor time at a minimum, turn down the thermostat and make sure the root ball stays moist.

Plant asparagus crowns between now and March 15th. For a faster harvest, buy 2-year-old crowns. Choose a rust-resistant male variety to ensure the plant's energy goes into making new stalks and not seeds.

In between holiday parties, take a few minutes to evaluate your garden's performance this year. Decide what worked and what didn't and take a few notes. Do a little garden research here: <http://alamance.ces.ncsu.edu> When those catalogs start rolling in, you'll be ready!



Arbor Gate Plant of the Month

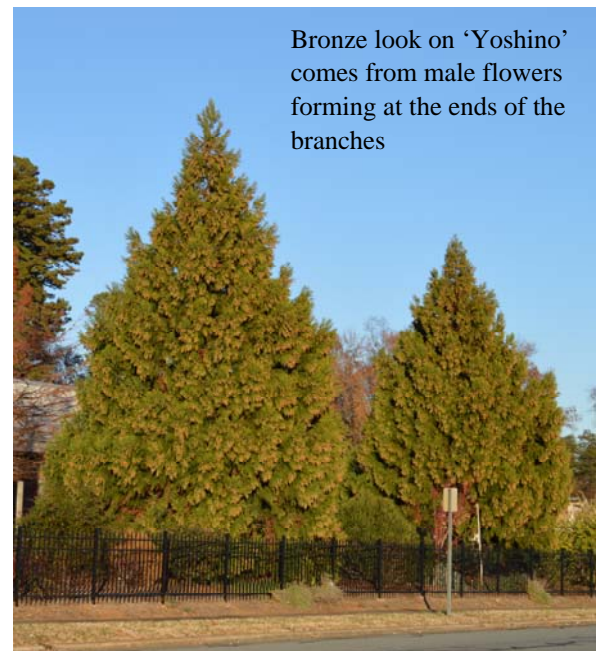


Cryptomeria japonica 'Yoshino'



Cryptomeria japonica 'Globosa Nana'

Japanese Cedar *Cryptomeria japonica*



Bronze look on 'Yoshino' comes from male flowers forming at the ends of the branches

Stalwart sentinel or compact accent, *Cryptomeria japonica* is the go-to evergreen for almost any situation! In its native land, Japanese Cedar is grown for its timber and soars to 180 feet or more. The ornamental *Cryptomeria* species grown here grow slowly to a more modest 40 feet or so. Dwarf cultivars remain a diminutive 3 to 4 feet. Boasting far fewer pest problems than the ubiquitous Leyland Cypress, Japanese Cedar makes a wonderful large screening tree or accent. If the trees begin to take up more room than you have to spare, as our "Yoshino" cultivars did, remove the lowest limbs to expose the attractive cinnamon-colored exfoliating bark and create a bit of shady space.

The links below have more information from NC State on these great evergreens :

<http://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/all/cryptomeria-japonica/>

<http://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants//all/cryptomeria-japonica-globosa-nana/>

<http://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants//all/cryptomeria-japonica-elegans-nana/>