

“Green” Holiday Greenery

Here are some thoughts on environmentally-friendly holiday decorating:

Real or artificial?

Even though plastic trees are a petroleum-based product, if they are reused for many years instead of trashed, they can be a good choice. On the other hand, Christmas tree farms absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen (an acre of the trees emits enough oxygen to support 18 people), while providing wildlife habitat and stabilizing soil. But remember, after the holidays, evergreens should be chipped into mulch or composted, not trashed—they take up lots of landfill space!

Decorate a living tree

For environmental purists, or simply because it sounds like fun, buy a live evergreen tree and plant it after the holidays. Lodi Farms, Fraleigh’s Nursery, Plymouth Nursery, and Arend Tree Farm are a few local sources. Prices range from \$20 to \$75.

Make it easy on yourself: choose a small tree (from 2 to 4 feet tall), dig the hole before the ground freezes, and store the dirt where it won’t freeze. Survival rates are best if trees are small, and are kept evenly moist and cold. If you must bring it inside, allow it to slowly warm up/cool down by keeping it in a cold but above-freezing location, like an unheated garage, for weeks both before and after bringing it in the house. Complete directions are available at www.realchristmastrees.org.

Ideally, to ensure survival, don’t bring the tree in the house at all. Decorate it with lights and enjoy it from inside, e.g. place in front of a window on an unheated front porch.

Why bother? Planting a tree will help offset the devastation wrought by the Emerald ash borer—a holiday gift to the earth. By slowing winter winds and shading the summer sun, it will reduce your home’s heating and cooling needs, while absorbing CO₂ and providing wildlife habitat.

Some people plant a small conifer after every holiday season. Within a few years they have Christmas tree-sized specimens in their yard, and can enjoy an annual tradition of choosing one to cut and bring inside for decorating—a truly sustainable practice!

Bittersweet alert

Bittersweet, the vine with lovely yellow and red seeds, is popular in holiday decorations. But gathering our native American bittersweet from the wild is illegal in Michigan, as it is protected under the Christmas Greens Protection Act.

American bittersweet is rare and is being overtaken by the Oriental bittersweet, which aggressively invades natural areas, smothering all in its path. Unfortunately, the native and non-native bittersweets are almost impossible to tell apart.

So if you find bittersweet in the wild, don't pick it. If you buy it, don't set it outside where birds can eat it—that is how Oriental bittersweet spreads. And don't compost it, lest it “escape” from there as well. Instead, seal it securely in a plastic bag and put it in your trash bin.

A little extra care goes a long way.

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