

## Columnists

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EcoConsumer

### **O Christmas tree, shall it be real or made in China?**

They only show up for a few weeks every year, yet Christmas trees have still managed to become an environmental touchstone.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

They only show up for a few weeks every year, yet Christmas trees have still managed to become an environmental touchstone.

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The "real vs. artificial" Christmas-tree debate gets rekindled annually, generating nearly as much passion as the "paper vs. plastic"

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grocery-bag quandary. Interest also runs high in the fate of Christmas trees after the holidays. So, let's cut through the confusion and learn how to make these iconic holiday symbols green in more ways than one.

**Q:** Do Christmas trees really even matter environmentally?

**A:** Holiday gifts and food have a greater eco-impact, but Christmas trees still cast a significant environmental shadow. Christmas tree farms in the U.S. cover 350,000 acres and produce 30 million trees per year. In addition, 13 million artificial holiday trees, mostly made overseas, are sold annually in the U.S. And don't forget all the resources consumed and the waste generated from shipping, storing, decorating and disposing of them.

**Q:** So which type of Christmas tree is actually greenest, real or artificial?

**A:** Either kind can be a green choice if you purchase and use it in a way to minimize its impact.

**Q:** That's encouraging. Let's start with real trees. What should I look for?

**A:** Choosing a locally grown tree reduces shipping impacts and supports area farmers. Find a local tree farm through PugetSoundFresh.org by clicking on "Find a Farm," then "Search by Crop & Location" and "Nursery Stock." Many offer pre-cut and "U-cut" trees.

Cutting your own tree on national forest lands, by permit, can be a fun family excursion and save money. It's usually best to do that earlier in the season, however, to avoid potentially hazardous mountain snow conditions.

If you patronize tree lots, try to find one that sells locally grown trees.

**Q:** How do I make sure my cut tree doesn't become a fire hazard?

**A:** Give it a fresh cut before bringing it in the house, and check the water in your tree stand every day. Use small, cool-burning, energy-efficient LED (light-emitting diode) holiday lights.

**Q:** What about living Christmas trees?

**A:** A living tree comes in a pot, and you bring it in for Christmas and leave it outside the rest of the year. After a few years when it gets too big to bring in, plant it in your yard or a friend's yard.

Some local nurseries and groups offer programs where you can bring back your living tree after Christmas and it is used for habitat restoration. Search online for "Trees for Salmon Seattle" or "Adopt a Stream" for details.

The downsides of a living Christmas tree are that its pot limits its size, and hauling the tree in and out of the house is a chore. You also shouldn't keep it inside longer than about 10 days to keep it healthy. But if a living tree works for you, it's an eminently green choice.

**Q:** Artificial trees sure seem easier. Aren't they eco-friendly?

**A:** If you reuse the same artificial tree 10 years or longer, the overall environmental footprint will likely be smaller than with a real tree. However, most artificial trees are made from polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic, which has been linked to health problems, especially in its production. PVC trees made before 2007 may contain traces of lead.

In a fun new twist, a Canadian paper company sells artificial Christmas trees online made from 100-percent recycled cardboard ([seati.ms/tFf4GD](http://seati.ms/tFf4GD)).

**Q:** I'll stick with a real tree, but what do I do with it after the holidays?

**A:** "Tree-cycle" it, of course! Check with your city or recycling hauler to find out how, or visit King County's Tree-cycling website ([seati.ms/g6ccho](http://seati.ms/g6ccho)) after Christmas. Many cities allow you to set out your tree curbside, where it is picked up and turned into compost. Community groups may also sponsor Christmas-tree collection drives.

Christmas trees are about memories, and being green is about the future. They really complement each other perfectly.

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