

The Annual Christmas Tree Guide



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- This year's guide to selecting the perfect Christmas tree takes its first step toward global coverage, with the inclusion of two very important European favorites.
- Lately, cut-it-yourself is becoming increasingly popular, as families seek to build new holiday traditions and focus on family time. But remember to bring old gloves, because the sap is hard to get off your hands (and your coat for that matter). You can find a local tree-farm by typing "Christmas tree farm (your state)" in your favorite search engine. If you've ever been disappointed by a tree that was dried out by the time you got it home, this may be worth a try.
- The basics don't change much, but they are always worth repeating: for staying power, pine is usually best, fir second, and spruce last, with lots of exceptions. If your tree stand goes dry - even for a day - your tree is doomed. Water twice a day until the tree stops taking up water.
- We've made this year's guide easier - and upgraded the pictures to help you see the differences up close. For those who always buy the tree that mom and dad bought, this may be just the extra push you need to branch out a little.
- To believe the hype, fake trees keep getting more realistic. Don't believe it. Most of the innovation lately has been geared toward couch potatoes (pre-lit, pre-decorated, etc). Our advice? If you are going to get a fake tree, it seems silly to aim for realism - our pick this year is a budget-priced white plastic model that will add effortless holiday cheer.

research team

Mark W. Connelly

Research Analyst
212 325 5844
mark.w.connelly@credit-suisse.com

Fitz Middleton

Research Analyst
212 538 6718
fitz.middleton@credit-suisse.com

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Our Top Picks for 2006

2

Concolor (White Fir)



photo credit: Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry

Ornaments	Smell	Longevity
V. Good	Excellent	Excellent

The Concolor is a personal favorite, but you won't find it at the "every tree \$25" lot - we order ours from a garden center, which is your best bet.

The first thing you will notice is the color - a deep blue-green. The second thing will be the needles - much longer than the usual, and softer (lights look especially good on this tree). If you run your fingers over a branch, you will smell tangerines.

With ornaments, this is a tree for those who understand the word "moderation"; the big branches are plenty strong, but the little ones get pretty thin.

Norway Spruce



photo credit: Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry

Ornaments	Smell	Longevity
V. Good	Good	Weak

More popular in Europe than the U.S. - this is the tree they trim at No. 10 Downing Street.

A nice clean green color, the Norway is very triangular, which gives it a very traditional look. It's branches are relatively dense, so ornaments are mostly hung on the outside, rather than up and down the branches. And those branches are only moderately strong, so you will have to save anything heavy for the bottom.

The only issue with the Norway is needle retention - pretty mediocre. So be prepared to water it twice a day, and to sweep up lots of needles.

Noble Fir



photo credit: Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry

Ornaments	Smell	Longevity
Excellent	Good	Excellent

The Noble is one of those "picture-perfect" trees that you see on greeting cards. Blue-green, with loads of tightly-packed needles that give it a really rich and substantial look.

Branches are strong and plentiful - you can hang heavy ornaments on one of these without any trouble at all. Well-shaped too - this tree has it all.

Best of all, the needles are practically glued on - a completely dried out Noble still holds its needles better than most. So if you are the sort who forgets to water, look for one of these and nobody has to know that you neglect your tree.

Fake Trees



photo credit: © klikk. Image from BigStockPhoto.com

Ornaments	Smell	Longevity
Excellent	Fake	Excellent

Last year's pick was a retro aluminum foil tree that was pretty pricey. We figured you'd just refinance, right? But now that your credit is maxed out, its time to look for a value-play.

Our choice for 2006 is a "White Snow Ridge Pre-Lit Holiday Artificial Christmas Tree" for \$49.88. A bit of a mouthful but a real bargain. We used the comparison shopping site PriceGrabber.com.

We like to trim our own tree, but even we agree that stringing lights isn't that much fun. You provide the ornaments - and the cheap-smelling pine scented aerosol - for just the right ambience.

Douglas Fir



photo credit: Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry

Ornaments	Smell	Longevity
Good	V. Good	V. Good

Not that you really care, but the Douglas Fir is not actually a fir. But it's a nice tree.

The needles are soft and flexible, and stay on pretty well if you water it. Not a lot of fragrance, except when you crush the needles. As you can see in the picture, the branches are thin and plentiful, so you can't hang piles of ornaments on this one - its great for popcorn strings and tinsel though.

The branches droop, which isn't a bad thing - it gives it a nice shape. It's just a very different look versus the upswept branches of most firs.

Fraser & Balsam Fir



photo credit: Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry

Ornaments	Smell	Longevity
V. Good	Excellent	Weak

In New York, Fraser's are the main trees they sell on the sidewalk in front of the dell's. They are among the most popular trees in the U.S.

Fraser and Balsam Firs have a strong fragrance, and they are relatively sappy. The branches are moderately strong, with lots of room for light ornaments.

If you typically forget to water, then this is not the tree for you - the needles start to fall off before you've even finished decorating it. You will definitely want one of those plastic tree bags. Expect to sweep up a lot of needles.

Nordman Fir



photo credit: Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry

Ornaments	Smell	Longevity
Excellent	Good	Excellent

This one is hard to find in the U.S., but is very popular in Europe, and for good reason - its a nice all-around tree with good color, that holds its needles better than a lot of trees. So if you forget to water, this could be a good choice.

Branches are not especially thick, but they are fairly strong and well-spaced, so you can hang quite a lot of ornaments.

Fragrance is middle-of-the-road. The key to selecting a Nordman is shape - they can be bottom-heavy, so shop carefully, or be prepared to string a lot of garland on the upper half to disguise the flaws.

Blue Spruce



photo credit: Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry

Ornaments	Smell	Longevity
Excellent	So-So	So-So

Personally, we think this one is better for trimming in your front yard than in your living room. It has a distinctive blue color that almost looks fake.

Taken inside, its still a nice tree, but it doesn't really excel. The branches are pretty strong, so you can put on a lot of ornaments without worry, but the needles aren't thick to begin with, and they fall off faster than some others.

Not particularly fragrant either, which for some may be a positive. But we keep coming back to that blue color, which we just think looks better on your lawn.

Arizona Cypress



photo credit: Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry

Ornaments	Smell	Longevity
So-so	V. Little	V. Good

This one is very cool. It's not even on the same family tree as the others here. Its hard to find up north, but if you see one, you should give it a try - you will probably be the first on your block to have one.

The color is a distinctive green-grey, with upswept branches. The tree doesn't have sap so may be a good choice for those with allergies.

Relatively compact. The branches are very flexible, so forget about heavy ornaments. But there is a lot of open space, so you can really load them up with lights, tinsel, and popcorn.

Western White Pine



photo credit: Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry

Ornaments	Smell	Longevity
So-so	V. Little	Excellent

If you want fragrance, this is not the tree for you. If you have allergies, it may be a winner.

Like most pines, needle retention is outstanding - water it and it will look fresh for weeks. Neglect it, and it will still look pretty decent.

As far as ornaments go, the branches are thinner than Scotch Pine, and the needles are much longer. So even with light ornaments, its still tricky to hang stuff on this one. They get pretty bushy sometimes too, so choose carefully. It's southern cousin has shorter, darker needles, and is a very nice alternative if you can find it.

Scotch Pine



photo credit: Virginia Tech Dept. of Forestry

Ornaments	Smell	Longevity
V. Good	Good	Excellent

This is probably still the most popular Christmas tree in America, although it isn't as dominant as it once was.

Pines have great needle retention, and this one is no exception. But you should still water it carefully - the color stays vibrant longer if you do.

Branches are thick and strong. If your mother-in-law got you a set of those heavy ceramic ornaments, you will want to consider a tree like this if you actually intend to hang them (some people just put them in a nice bowl on the coffee table instead). Not the most shapely tree, but a very good one.

Mistletoe



photo credit: © Alan Egginton. Image from BigStockPhoto.com

It's amazing how many people don't buy mistletoe anymore - what kind of romantic skips the mistletoe? Many tree-sellers don't bother to stock it, but a good florist or garden center will.

You probably didn't know that mistletoe is a parasite. And you probably didn't know that language experts think the name derives from a reference to bird droppings on a branch, but maybe you didn't want to know that part.

As for the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe, it's origins are thought to be related to the love goddess Frigga, although there are some historical references to fertility rights as well. This one goes way back...

Mistletoe berries are poisonous, although rarely fatal in humans. Keep it up high, away from kids and pets.

All You Need to Know

How to get a fresh one

Do you really want to go out in the cold, damp, and mud to cut down your own tree, then haul it back to your car? If you have kids and you don't mind the cold, you may well be among the increasing numbers who reply "yes". In that case, you are going to get a very fresh tree. Get started by typing "[Christmas tree farm \[your state\]](#)" into a good search engine. Chances are, you'll find one within 30 minutes of home. Shop early for the best selection – tree farms really are getting popular, so the best trees go shortly after Thanksgiving.

Don't want the hassle? When you buy a pre-cut tree, even if you buy early, you are still getting a tree that in most cases was cut many weeks earlier, then loaded on a truck to reach your local re-seller. So your tree hasn't had any water for ages. Always make sure they cut off an inch or so from the stump, or better yet, do it yourself when you get home. In most cases, the tree will be ravenously thirsty, so water it several times a day the first couple of days – if the stand runs dry, your tree will probably stop taking up water again.

When you pick out a cut tree, rub the needles between your fingers, going with, then against the direction of growth. Very few should fall off. It doesn't prove its fresh, but it does make it more likely that you won't be sweeping up a lot of needles right away. Keep in mind some trees can be bone dry and still hold their needles (Concolors are like that) – a big advantage in terms of clean up.

Ordering a tree from a reputable garden center may seem a little silly when they have a lot full of trees to choose from, but you may want to consider it. The Concolor we buy isn't widely available near us, and so they usually only have a few on hand. If you order in advance, they will generally put aside one of the nicest ones for you – whether you pick it up early or not. The downside is that your kids don't get to pick the tree, but you can still let them run around to see what's available.

As we've noted in the past, we always buy the Prolong® stuff that the garden center we buy from stocks. It's mainly marketed for floral arrangements. Most experts say that it doesn't help, and nor do the home-brew concoctions you have tried. But who cares? If nothing else, it probably helps us get over the guilt of benefiting from the killing of a perfectly nice little tree. Watering twice a day is best.

After the Holiday

There are no good statistics about what happens to the trees after you dump them at the curb, but if you are among those who use that shredded foil "tinsel", rest assured that you are not being very environmentally correct unless you take it all off again before you put the tree outside. In many areas, they are fed through a chipper and turned into mulch. In a few places, they are even dumped into the ocean in what proponents call "natural reefs" (which sounds pretty suspect to us). Cutting your tree up to use as firewood is a bad idea since the sap in a lot of these trees makes them burn very unevenly, with a lot of "popping", which can start fires. Fireplace logs should be hardwood; Christmas trees are softwood.

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