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Main Feature Story - Friday, November 27, 2009

Green Holidays: The kindest cut of all

Make sure your holiday sapling isn't sapping the environment

 by **Samantha Campos**
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,
How are thy leaves so verdant!
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,
Much pleasure doth thou bring me!—adapted from the traditional German carol, "O Tannenbaum"

Even the most curmudgeonly among us cannot deny the pleasurable scent of a fresh Christmas tree. Speckled with silver tinsel and strings of lights or bedecked in popcorn garlands and heirloom ornaments, our decorated tree sets the ambiance for a whole season of festivities. Even the very act of decorating seems to bring the household together in the spirit of the holidays. But as "verdant" as "thy leaves" might be, how environmentally green are our beloved Christmas trees, really?

Chopping down a tree after Thanksgiving just to throw it out by the new year doesn't initially sound so very green. A common alternative to the cut pine—sans abstinence, of course—is the altogether less-fresh but annually reusable plastic tree. But is a fake Christmas tree more environmentally friendly than the real thing? Apparently not, considering that the majority of artificial trees are produced outside of the U.S. and are made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC)—the most toxic of all plastics, possibly one of the most hazardous consumer products ever made—and is not recyclable. And if it's been around for a while, your plastic tree is likely to contain lead (which, as you know, is not so great for the kids). So OK—just say no to faux.

There are other options, like buying a live tree and planting it—but you'll likely be planting a non-native tree in an inappropriate landscape if you don't know what you're doing (contact your local nursery, to be sure). You could decorate a living tree in your backyard or hang a sequined bulb on a houseplant you already have—but then your ornamentation outside may get damaged and your decorated fern may look a little like Charlie Brown's sad little Tannenbaum. There's always the option of making a "crafts tree" out of found objects—which would, unfortunately, require no small amount of effort and creativity. If you live or spend your holidays in Los Angeles, you could rent a living tree through the Living Christmas Company (livingchristmas.com) and have a live, potted tree delivered to your door—but then you'd have to be in, ugh, L.A. Our neighbors in San Francisco can order living, potted Christmas trees for a limited time through Friends of the Urban Forest and S.F. Environment (www.sfenvironment.org), which then retrieves the trees after the holidays and plants them on S.F. city streets. Ah, but the parking!

Well, anyway, according to the online environmental sites Grist (www.grist.org) and TreeHugger (www.treehugger.com), the best Christmas tree option in this county does indeed seem to be the "good old-fashioned wooden kind" that you'd get from a farm—although when selecting your tree, keep in mind the usual eco-tips. Try to find trees grown organically versus ones grown with pesticides or herbicides, local farms are best and stick with family operations instead of large-scale producers. In general, Christmas tree farms operate on sustainability; when you cart yours away, they'll plant a new seedling replacement (usually two to three) that'll be ripe for another cozy holiday home in a few years, all whilst doing its splendidous tree thing—turning carbon dioxide into oxygen and providing habitats for wildlife.

Eco-experts say that just 1 acre of Christmas trees produces the daily oxygen requirement for 18 people; the trees typically require no irrigation water, are raised in their natural region and stabilize soil. Christmas trees are recyclable (call Marin Sanitary Service at 415/456-2601) and biodegradable. And actually, what you do with your tree *after* you've enjoyed it is just as important as deciding which kind and where to get it. Instead of simply throwing your tree in the trash and contributing to our overflowing landfills, consider converting it to mulch or compost.

Oh Christmas tree, Oh Christmas tree—Forever true your colour!

Local Tree Farms

McGovern Christmas Tree Farm, 563 McClay Rd., Novato—A 31-year-running family operation, with plantation-grown Noble firs shipped in from Salem, Oregon, and an on-site, licensed "flockologist."

Little Hills Christmas Tree Farm, 961 Chapman Lane, Petaluma—Choose and cut your own pines, Leyland cypress and Sierra redwood. Ready-cut Noble, Douglas and Turkish fir trees are also available. www.littlehillschristmastree.com

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Larsen's Christmas Tree Farm, 391 Marshall Ave., Petaluma—Choose and cut your own Monterey pine, Leyland cypress, Sierra redwood and Scotch pines (saws, carts and assistants available). Ready-cut Noble, Douglas and Turkish fir, as well as wreaths and garlands are also available.

The Liberty Christmas Tree Farm, 241 Liberty Rd., Petaluma—Cut and choose from Douglas fir, Monterey pine and Sierra redwood; with freshly cut Noble, Douglas and Turkish fir available.

 Tell Samantha your Christmas tree tale at scampos@pacificsun.com

Comments

Posted by L White, a resident of the San Anselmo neighborhood, on Nov 30, 2009 at 6:37 pm

"Instead of simply throwing your tree in the trash and contributing to our overflowing landfills, consider converting it to mulch or compost."

In good humor -


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Sometimes the Sun's comments sound "so Maaarin".

What do you think that Christmas trees do in a landfill - They decompose. Naturally. And they produce CO2 and methane, like most all organic decomposition - whether it's decomposed mulch or composted compost or eaten by termites and wood ants and fungi in the forest.

Are you proposing renting a chipper and converting it to chips for mulch? Let's drive to Big 4 or Hertz rentals, rent a chipper, tow it home. Chip the tree on Jan 5 and then tow the chipper back to the rental location.... And cost \$80 rental + fuel + time?

Certainly doesn't sound very effective - cost wise or environmentally.

Best off, you make something that people can use with that used tree and cut the well meaning, but cut the nice "Marin words" a bit shorter.

You could have spent 3 minutes and a phone call and checked to see what the trash companies do with the trees that they pick up - That might be a useful story. <wink!>

Luckily, most Marinites will do the easiest thing and leave their tree on the sidewalk for garbage pickup and MSS or whoever can sell the mulch to someone who really needs mulch.

But spending hours to mulch your own tree is a waste, financially and ecologically.

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Posted by anon, a resident of the Mill Valley neighborhood, 20 hours ago

You could also just take your tree to a forest a lay it down on the forest floor. Nature will take care of the rest.

It's seems sad to have to chop a tree only to end up laying back down where you originally found it after Christmas is over. But that's what happens.

I suppose we'll eventually get a "fake" tree and we'll assemble it every year. When I was growing up we did that for a few years and it was fine. But there's something about a real tree.

If there are enough of them, then chopping one down isn't the end of the world. But short of doing the work to mulch it, laying it back down on the forest floor would be the best bet.

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