

Whether it is a scraggly Charlie Brown Christmas tree, or a towering Norway spruce that they will use in Rockefeller Center, Christmas trees are a thing of beauty. While I'm all for supporting local businesses, it is possible to grow your own Christmas tree. Assuming you've got several years, and are willing to put in a little work.

First things first, I'd like to clarify some terms. Evergreen can refer to any plant that keeps its leaves all year round. These aren't necessarily trees with needles, such as spruce, pine, or fir, they can also be broadleaf species like holly, Korean boxwood, and others. Conifer refers to trees with needles or scales instead of leaves. I'm going to try to stick to the phrase Christmas tree in this column, referring to a pine, fir, or spruce that you would normally see as Christmas trees. A good way to tell the difference between the three is that when you roll the needles in your fingers, fir needles are flat, pine needles are round, and spruce needles are square.

Before you even buy a tree, there are some things that will need to be checked to make sure you have the proper growing conditions. The first thing to decide is where you are going to place the tree. Evergreen trees need plenty of room to grow, and growers need to be sure that the tree will have enough room to become its desired size. If there isn't enough room, because of a house or other trees, the evergreen will get shaded out. This happens when needles aren't receiving enough sunlight, so the plant will kill off those needles in order to give the more productive needles more resources. Shading out could lead to an unsightly Christmas tree with dead branches. Once it is certain that the tree will be planted in the proper site, the soil properties of the site should be checked for nutrients, adequate drainage, and pH. Christmas trees don't like wet feet, which can lead to growth reduction and possible disease. But if a soil has too much drainage, such as a sandy soil, there is potential for the tree to dry out too fast between waterings, inhibiting growth and possibly injuring the tree. You can alleviate some of this by planting an evergreen that is proven to grow well in Nebraska conditions, such as a Norway spruce, or a Douglas fir. Austrian and white pine, blue spruce, and concolor fir are also all good options. Like all landscape plants, these should be monitored year round for problems like disease or insects.

As you may have noticed observing trees in landscapes, Christmas trees tend to be shaped a little bit differently than regular evergreen trees that are grown for landscapes. This isn't because they are a different species, at least not always. Christmas trees are always the desired shape because they are sheared, which is similar to pruning. It's normally done about midsummer, after the candles, the new growth on trees with needles, have fully elongated. Depending on the preference, shearing can be done with most sharp gardening tools. The goal is that the width of the bottom of the tree is two-thirds the height of the tree. For example, a six foot tree would have a width of four feet. The sides are then sheared to form that perfect Christmas tree triangle. This process causes more buds to form on the new growth for the next year, resulting in bushier and fuller growth than what the tree would have naturally. Shearing starts around when the trees are around four to five feet high. Measurement is based off of height instead of age because some years will be more conducive to growth than others. Commercial trees are sold when they are around six feet tall, which can be a tree that is anywhere from seven to ten years old. There are also some people who use live trees in pots for their Christmas tree, and then plant it in their landscape after Christmas.

Other than shearing the tree, growing a Christmas tree is very similar to growing any other tree. It takes time and effort, but it can be well worth it. Make sure the tree receives enough light on all sides, and watch for insects and disease. I wish you the best of luck.

A special thanks goes to one of my readers for suggesting this week's column topic. If you have any questions or would like to suggest a topic for me to write about, feel free to contact me at the Buffalo County Extension Office, at 308-236-1235, or mearnest2@unl.edu.