

Tinsel time: Tree-trimming tips for decorating safely

BY DARCY L. HIMES
Copley News Service

When indulging in a favorite holiday ritual this year — decorating the Christmas tree — keep safety in mind.

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, holiday decorating accidents caused more than 1,500 people to be treated at emergency rooms nationwide during the last holiday season.

In addition, according to the National Fire Prevention Association, a fire safety advocate group, Christmas trees were the items first ignited in 500 home fires each year from 1991 to 1995, resulting in 18 civilian deaths, 108 civilian injuries and \$20.6 million in direct property damage.

“Cords and plugs were the leading type of equipment involved in the ignition of Christmas trees, accounting for more than 50 fires per year,” the NFPA reported.

Underwriters Laboratories Inc., a product safety certification organization, has a designated UL mark on products that have been tested for foreseeable safety hazards. UL began partnering with NFPA in 1997 to bring “Operation Decoration” to consumers.

Here are their tips:

RIGHT TREE, RIGHT PLACEMENT

Decorating safety and avoiding holiday fire hazards start with a fresh tree.

CPSC offers these tips for identifying a fresh tree:



- A fresh tree is green.
 - Fresh needles are hard to pull from branches.
 - When bent between your fingers, fresh needles do not break.
 - The trunk butt of a fresh tree is sticky with resin.
 - When the trunk of a tree is bounced on the ground, a shower of falling needles shows that the tree is too dry.
- Live trees should be kept in sturdy stands filled with water at all times.
- Pay attention to the humidity levels in your home, as dry winter air can cause a tree to dry out quickly.
- Don't place trees within 3 feet of heat sources, particu-

larly fireplaces, radiators, space heaters or heat vents (either floor or ceiling). Televisions also count as a heat source.

Remember to always place Christmas trees out of the way of doorways and exits.

If your family prefers an artificial tree, look for one that is fire resistant and has been tested and approved by an independent product safety organization. UL says product packaging will indicate if the branches on artificial trees have been treated with flame-retardant material.

However, UL watts, light strings and other electrical

decorations should not be used on artificial trees or greens that have metallic needles, leaves or branch coverings.

THE GOOD LIGHT

Once you've ensured tree safety, take further precautions with your electrical tree decorations. First up, dig through those stored Christmas boxes for the light strings. While unplugged, lay them out on the floor and inspect them for damage.

Cracked sockets, frayed or bare wiring and 1006e connections may cause serious electric shock or fire, UL says.

You can plug in the light strings one at a time to check for burned out bulbs, but remember to unplug the string again when replacing bulbs or fuses.

If you have to replace entire damaged light strings, be sure to choose those that bear the mark of an independent safety testing laboratory and are designed for indoor use.

The United States Fire Administration suggests checking wires periodically during the time you have the tree up. They should never be warm to the touch.

Extension cords can come in handy for hooking up multiple light strings, but only if used properly; overloads can lead to overheating and fire. Extension cords aren't meant to be run across doorways, under carpeting, rugs or furniture, or near heaters.

“Check the markings on your electrical decorations to determine the maximum number of decorative light strings that may be connected together,” UL says.

If there's no indication, don't connect more than three midget (push-in bulbs) light strings together. Screw-in bulb strings (C7s and C9s) can have a maximum of only 50 bulbs connected.

Candles are another popular Christmas decorating item. Not for the tree, though. Under no circumstances can lighted candles be used to decorate either a live or artificial tree.

Although you'll be tempted

to share your holiday tree beauty with neighbors, turn off or unplug all decorative lights before going to bed or leaving the house.

BET ON SAFE DECORATIONS

Trimming the tree by adding ornaments, garland and other special items that make the tree sparkle also requires attention to safety.

CPSC suggests the following tree-trimming tips:

- Use only non-combustible or flame-resistant materials.
- Wear gloves when decorating with spun glass “angel hair” to avoid irritation to eyes and skin.
- Choose tinsel or artificial icicles made of plastic or non-leaded metals.
- Artificial snow sprays can irritate lungs if inhaled. To avoid injury, read container labels and follow directions carefully.
- In homes with young children, take extra care to:
 - Avoid decorations that are sharp or breakable.
 - Keep trimmings with small, removable parts out of the reach of children, as pieces could be swallowed or inhaled.
 - Avoid trimmings that resemble candy or food.
 - Homemade decorations might add a special nuance to your tree, but place those made of paper or other flammable, non-treated materials away from bulbs or wires for added safety. The same goes for garland or strung popcorn.

With care, holiday plants can be enjoyed all year

BY PAT STEIN
Copley News Service

With proper care, popular holiday plants such as poinsettias, Christmas cactus and living Christmas trees can survive and even thrive long after the yuletide season is over.

It's not unusual for the colored bracts of a good poinsettia plant to last for a couple of months with proper care. And it's possible (but not easy) to get a plant to rebloom.

Experts at the Paul Ecke poinsettia ranch offer the following tips on how to keep your poinsettia plants looking good:

■ Place the plant in indirect sunlight for at least six hours a day. Keep room

temperature between 68 and 70 degrees and don't expose plants to temperatures below 50 degrees or chilly winds. Avoid placing plants near heating ducts, cold drafts, fireplaces and appliances.

■ Don't fertilize the plant while it's in bloom. Water plants thoroughly when soil in the pot feels dry to the touch, but don't let them sit in standing water. (Always remove the plant from any decorative container when watering and allow water to drain before returning it to the container.)

■ After the blooming season, nourish the plant with an all-purpose plant fertilizer. Cut the plants back to four to six buds by early April or when the bracts begin to fall, whichever comes first. Place the plant near a sunny window, water and fertilize regularly.

New growth should sprout by the end of May. Continue watering and fertilizing. Beginning on Oct. 1, the plants should be kept in total darkness for all but six hours of the day, during which time they need bright sunlight.

Requisite darkness can be accomplished by placing a cardboard box over the plant. After eight to 10 weeks of the light and dark treatment, plants should develop a new display of blooms — just in time for the holidays.

Potted poinsettias are indoor plants and generally do not thrive when transplanted to the garden, according to Ecke experts.

When choosing a poinsettia, look for a plant with thoroughly colored and expanded bracts. Select plants with strong, stiff stems and no signs of wilting. Foliage should be dense all the way to the soil line. Be wary of plants displayed in paper or plastic sleeves for these can

restrict needed airflow.

CHRISTMAS CACTUS

In nature, Christmas cactuses grow in trees, but a potted cactus also can thrive indoors in bright, filtered light or on a patio. They need well-drained soil, according to Chris Greenwood, director of public relations for the Armstrong Nurseries chain.

“Let soil dry out between waterings but don't let it get parched,” he advised.

He recommends feeding with an organic all-purpose fertilizer such as E.B. Stone rose and flower food. Sprinkle one tablespoon of the granular fertilizer around the plant and water every six weeks. Year after year, the plant will rebloom around Thanksgiving or Christmastime without any prompting or trickery.

“Older established Christmas cactus in hanging pots are truly spectacular when they rebloom with hundreds of red, pink, white, orange-red or lavender flowers every year. The blossoms usually last for weeks,” Greenwood said.

LIVING CHRISTMAS TREES

Living Christmas trees really prefer to be outdoors, but they can tolerate up to 10 days indoors as long as they are not allowed to dry out and are kept away from heating ducts.

“Living Christmas trees don't like the warm, dry air indoors. They prefer the cool humidity outdoors,” said Greenwood. “Turn the heat off in the room where you have the tree.”

Watering is crucial and Greenwood suggests placing ice cubes on top of the soil in the container so water will gradually drip down and keep the root ball moist. Do this at least twice a week. He points out that,

unlike other plants that wilt when they get thirsty, the pine, fir and spruce trees that usually are used as living Christmas trees don't show immediate signs of water deprivation but once the damage is done, it's irreversible.

After the Christmas season the tree should be moved outdoors and possibly transplanted. A five-gallon tree can graduate to a seven-gallon container, then to a 15-gallon container and finally to a whiskey barrel. The containers should be filled with good-quality potting soil.

Whether it's a Monterey pine, an Italian stone pine, an Aleppo pine, a juniper, a Colorado blue spruce or Alberta spruce, the tree needs to be clipped into Christmas tree shape. Do the clipping in September or October and then feed with a good all-purpose fertilizer that contains iron to promote new growth.

When planting a living tree in the ground, dig a hole twice as big around as the pot. Condition the extra soil with amendments such as peat. If the soil is hard clay, work gypsum into the soil at bottom of the hole to make it easier for the roots to take hold and to promote drainage. When placing the tree in the hole make sure the original soil level matches the surrounding soil level. Keep the root ball moist until the roots have a chance to establish themselves in the ground. When watering, place the hose against the trunk of the tree and allow it to run at a slow trickle so the water will soak in.

In temperate climates, junipers, Monterey pines, Italian stone pines and Aleppos do well, according to Greenwood. In colder climates, spruce and fir trees will thrive.

Tree smarts: Stand it straight

By The Associated Press

That Christmas tree you brought home from the corner lot no longer has its own roots to stand on, so it's up to you to make sure it stands tall and straight.

Some basic engineering skill will help, advises Ben Sill, civil engineer at Clemson University. His advice:

- Choose a tree that is symmetrical and has a straight trunk. Lop-sided or crooked trees are accidents waiting to happen.
- Avoid the round Christmas tree stands. Instead, use one with legs — the longer legs the better. These will help redistribute the weight of the tree.
- Don't crowd the tree into a wall. That can unbalance the tree and make it fall.
- If your tree is still tipsy, adopt what Sill calls “brute-force engineering” — install screw-eye hooks near the top of the window that is the tree's chosen spot. Then run small-gauge guide wires from the screw eyes to the top of tree. “Before, everyone would have to look at the tree, then adjust it to the left, adjust it to the right, and so on,” Sill said. “This way, I just get it fairly close, and the problem is solved.”
- Now that your tree is up and balanced, start by hanging the heaviest ornaments directly over and parallel to the legs of the tree stand. Sill says this is the “force times distance” argument. OK, you don't understand that? Just do it. It will keep the tree from tipping over.

...And keep it safe

The tree you bring inside can be dried out by your house heating — putting it at risk for a fire.

The National Fire Protection Association offers these tips:

- Choose only flame-resistant, flame-retardant or non-combustible decorations.
- Check light strings for damage, and don't overload extension cords.
- When mounting lights, don't use nails or anything else that could damage the cord's insulation.
- Turn off the tree lights when you leave the house or go to bed.

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