

Meat the Future

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“The Science Behind a Live Christmas Tree”

By the time you are reading this article, chances are your Christmas tree is already providing that beautiful “glow” that makes the holiday season so dreamy and warm. Whether your family unpacks an artificial tree each year or makes a special trip to pick out a real tree, the Christmas tree is most likely a true center of your holiday decorating.

Don’t worry – this is not an article to debate whether you should wait until after Thanksgiving to put up your tree or unpack it as early as November 1st! Instead, let’s take a dive into a little “tree science” while I share information from an article I found on the American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture website titled, “How Do Christmas Trees Grow?”.

To start off the article we see an interview conducted in 2016 by the American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture introduces us to Ben Butler, who is the Farm and Finance Manager for Butler’s Orchard located in Germantown, Maryland. This family farm, where Ben grew up living and working, is a 300-acre “pick-your-own” business where they raise small fruit, tree fruit, Christmas trees and vegetables.

What does it take to grow a Christmas tree?

“It takes a lot!”, says Butler. “We try to allocate 40-45 acres to our Christmas Tree Production. Growing a tree has many similarities to growing other crops. Before planting, it is our goal to eliminate all tough to manage perennial weeds, adjust the pH to our target range (depending on the tree species), and establish ideal soil fertility for seedlings. This all needs to be done a year (or years) in advance. Grass is planted in the fall, and the trees get planted in early spring. From there, it takes about 6-8 years for the trees to grow to a marketable height. During this time we monitor for weeds, fertility issues, and pests and as an IPM (Integrated pest management) farm, we take control measures only when needed.

Butler shared that upon reaching about 3'-4' in height, a process called "shearing" begins. Typically, in July or August the new growth from the spring begins to harden off, this is when crews go through and shape each individual tree with a sharp knife. Years of shaping and shearing results in beautiful iconic Christmas tree look once the tree has reached full height. Some varieties require more or less shearing based on specific growth habits.

What are the most popular tree varieties and what are the major difference?

Butler states in the article, “The most popular varieties of Christmas tree are Douglas Fir, Canaan Fir, and Fraser Fir. Douglas Fir have a traditional cone-shaped look, with good needle retention and a moderate fragrance. Canaan firs and Frasers are very similar. Both have a more open and natural look. Their needle retention is excellent and Frasers have a slightly stronger fragrance than Canaan.”

What are some tips for cutting and picking your own Christmas tree?

Always make sure that the tree is the appropriate size for your home. Butler cautions that trees seem a lot smaller when they are out in the field than they actually are. Most Christmas tree farms can measure or have devices that can be used before cutting.

The farm owner states, “Take a look inside the tree at the trunk itself. Be sure that there isn't a big curve in the trunk, or even worse, a double trunk. These trees generally won't stand up straight or even fit in the stand.”

And finally, review the tree's outer needles to ensure there is no yellowing or shedding of needles. But, keep in mind that trees grow new needles every year, so some needle drop is to be expected.

Would your family enjoy watching a short video on how Christmas trees grow? Check out the video at this link: <https://youtu.be/lcmVOcCWbQg>

Information in this article has been adapted from an article titled, “How Do Christmas Trees Grow?” on the American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture website.

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