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# Extension Extra

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SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY / U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

## Christmas Tree Selection

by Dr. John Ball, assistant professor,  
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and Dr. David Graper, Extension horticulturist

A Christmas tradition for many South Dakota families is choosing and cutting their own tree from a local Christmas tree farm. Others pick out their cut tree at a retail store. Either way, the freshness and fragrance of a real tree adds a special touch to the holidays.

There is not a single species of Christmas tree that is perfect for everyone. The tree that fits the holiday needs of one family may not be well suited to another. It is important for Christmas tree buyers to **know how to identify the various trees and be familiar with three Christmas tree characteristics: needle retention, branch stiffness and fragrance.**

**Needle retention** is the length of time that needles will remain on a properly cared for tree. There is a wide range among the various Christmas tree species. Many spruce retain their needles for only two or three weeks after harvest, while some pines will hold their needles for a month or more.

**Branch stiffness** relates to the tree's ability to hold ornaments and lights without bending. Several trees, such as Fraser fir, have very flexible branches that bend easily under the weight of ornaments. Some pines and spruces are better choices if large, heavy ornaments will be used on the tree.

Many people find that the **fragrance** of a fresh tree adds much to the holiday atmosphere. Some trees have a very pleasant fragrance, others have poor or very little fragrance.

**White pine, Douglas fir, and Fraser fir** often are sold as Christmas trees in retail lots, but these trees are too tender to grow in most of South Dakota. They can be found at some choose-and-cut farms along the eastern edge of the state. These three trees have very good to excellent needle retention, fair to good branch stiffness, and excellent fragrance.

Characteristics of the Christmas tree species most commonly available in South Dakota.

species	needle retention	stiffness of twigs	fragrance
Red cedar (or Rocky Mt. juniper)	good	good	good
Austrian pine	very good	very good	good
Scotch pine	excellent	excellent	good
Blue spruce	good	excellent	good
White spruce (Black Hills)	fair	very good	poor

## Identifying Christmas tree species

Most retail stores and many choose-and-cut Christmas tree farms have the various species they grow identified with labels or different colored ribbons.

If you find yourself at a store or farm that has not identified its trees, the illustrations at right and the information in the chart below may help. It is always best to ask, however, before you cut.

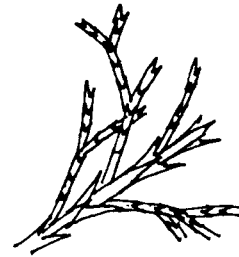
## Care for the Cut Tree

After the tree is brought home, there are a few simple steps to follow to keep it fresh. First, recut the base about an inch above the original cut, immediately place the tree in the stand, and fill the stand with water.

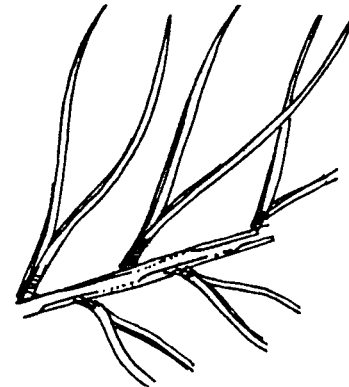
Keep your eye on the water level and refill as needed. Once a tree's base dries, it can not absorb water readily unless the base is recut. The tree probably will use a lot of water in the first day or two, so be sure to check it often.

The water temperature is not critical, nor is it necessary to add any preservatives.

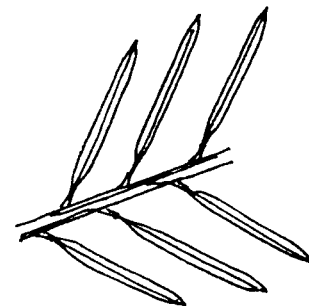
Red cedar



Pine



Spruce



Identification features of the commonly available Christmas trees.

species	needle length	needle arrangement	needle color
Red cedar (or Rocky Mt. juniper)	1/8 - 1/2"	whorls of scales or needles	green to bluish-green
Austrian pine	4 - 6"	bundles of 2's	dark green
Scotch pine	2 - 4"	bundles of 2's	bluish-green
Blue spruce	1 - 1 1/2"	single	gray green to bluish-green
White spruce (Black Hills)	1/2 - 1"	single	green

Note: Austrian pine and blue spruce needles are sharp and stiff.



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