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Putting Your Christmas Tree to Good Use

by James A. Fizzell

Sr. Ext. Adviser, Horticulture, U. of I.

It is always a melancholy time when the excitement of the Holidays is over and the tree is taken down. Most of us hate to just throw out the tree that has provided so much enjoyment.

The one thing you should not do with the old tree, is to burn it in the fireplace. A dry tree will burn with intense heat and may buckle a steel fireplace, crack a flue in a brick chimney, or could start a chimney fire. If anything, use the small twigs for kindling, he suggests.

An old tradition dating to the middle ages is to move the tree outside and set it up for the animals, decorated with various kinds of foods.

Bird will appreciate suet cakes with seeds, strings of popcorn or cranberries and fresh pine cones with seeds still inside.

Squirrels will appreciate strings of peanuts or apple slices.

During inclement weather the tree can provide protection to animals who will roost in it or huddle under it as long as the storm persists.

Birds such as cardinals and jays, which stay here all year, are much more likely to take permanent residence in your yard if invited there for the winter.

If you are already providing for the animals, there are other ways the old tree can be put to good use.

For areas such as ours where there is always the danger of alternate freezing and thawing, perennials should be covered, not to keep them warm, but to keep them cold. For this reason you always need to wait to mulch the garden until after the ground has frozen. The ideal mulch is light enough to permit air to penetrate, but substantial enough to shade the soil and keep it from thawing every time the sun shines on it.

A good mulch to use for this purpose, easily available after Christmas, is your left over Christmas tree. Branches from your tree can be cut up and laid over your perennial bed. Two layers of boughs, crisscrossed, should suffice. They admit air to the ground, but keep out the sun.

In the spring, remove the boughs in two stages, three or four days apart just as the first new sprouts appear. This permits the tender new growth to become gradually acclimated to the still chilly spring air.

If you have extensive perennial beds or strawberries, you might run out of branches from your own tree. But you can be sure there will be a ready supply as neighbors discard their trees.

After removing the branches, save the trunks. They make good bean poles or tomato stakes.

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