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In Your Garden Christmas Tree Facts & Figures

According to James A. Fizzell, Horticulturist in Cook County, when you set up and decorate your Christmas tree you will be partaking in a tradition with its origins in antiquity. The Egyptians, Romans, and Druids all used decorated trees in celebrating the winter solstice long before the dawn of Christianity, says Fizzell.

Most historians agree that use of an evergreen tree as part of the Christmas celebration started about 400 years ago in Germany. There is a legend that one Christmas Eve, Martin Luther was journeying through the pine forest. He was inspired by the sight of thousands of stars twinkling through the branches of the trees. When he arrived home, he cut down a fir tree and covered it with small candles so that the children might know what the heavens were like.

The custom was introduced into England when Victoria married German Prince Albert. Victoria commanded that a green tree be brought into the palace each year and decorated for Christmas as it might have been in Albert's homeland. Hessian mercenaries brought the custom to the U.S. during the American Revolution.

Here in Illinois, the first Christmas trees were set up in 1804. Soldiers stationed at Fort Dearborn hauled trees from surrounding woods to their barracks during the Christmas season.

When I was a youngster, remembers Fizzell, most people got their Christmas trees from the forest. Today over 90% of the fresh trees come from Christmas tree plantation, he says.

Growing Christmas trees isn't an easy business. It takes from four to over 12 years for a seedling to mature into a saleable tree. During that time it must be trained, pruned, and protected from many hazards. Trees can suffer from too little or too much sun or rain; destructions by rodents, deer, insects, diseases, hail or fire; or being overgrown by brush, vines or weeds.

While they are growing, Christmas trees provide many environmental benefits. Each acre of trees provides the daily requirements of oxygen for 18 people. The trees serve as wildlife habitat, and stabilize the soil. Often Christmas trees are planted on barren slopes or under power lines where no other crops will grow.

More than 35 million American families will buy natural Christmas trees this year. Nearly 100 million seedlings are planted more than to replace harvested trees. One million acres are now planted each year with Christmas trees in the United States.

The most popular trees nationwide are Scotch pine, Douglas fir, balsam fir, white pine, and Fraser fir.

After the holidays, Christmas trees can be "recycled" in a number of ways. Christmas trees are biodegradable. Branches may be used for cover in the garden. The entire tree may be chipped for mulch. Trees sunk in fish ponds or lakes make excellent refuge and feeding areas.

Or you can use the tree as a bird feeder and wildlife shelter. Hang suet cakes, fruit or popcorn on the branches to attract feathery friends.