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O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum

By Cynthia Brian



A modern Currier and Ives cozy Christmas living room. Photos Cynthia Brian

weeds, planted the seedlings, protected them with wire from marauding munchers, maintained soil moisture, and waited. The kids were very attentive to their trees. By year three, pruning and shaping the trees into conical forms began. Who knew that "Christmas trees" didn't automatically grow into perfect Christmas specimens? By year 7, they cut their first glorious imperfect tree and by year 13 all of the trunks were too large for any tree holder. Instead of cutting another tree, we potted a large Norfolk pine, added it to our entrance, where this oxygen producing, carbon dioxide absorber has served as our beloved arbre de Noel.

History, legend, or a combination of the two chronicles the tales of 16th century Germans bringing evergreens into their homes as holiday decor after Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, witnessed the stars sparkling through the forest trees and cut a tree to enjoy indoors. In 2014, Christmas trees are as significant to American culture as apple pie. But it wasn't until 1848 that Puritanical America embraced the idea of the "pagan" Christmas tree. The ever-popular Queen Victoria and her German Prince Albert were sketched with their children gathered around a decorated Christmas tree and East Coast society adopted this new fashionable trend. Currier and Ives jumped on the bucolic family festivity bandwagon by immortalizing vintage America in historic lithographs of cozy Christmas scenes including sleigh rides, crackling fires, candlelit chapels, snowmen, and tree decorating. Yet, the love of winter evergreens was celebrated long before the arrival of Christianity. In ancient Egypt, the sun god Ra was honored on the longest night of the year, Dec. 21, and the shortest day, Dec. 22 with palm frond decorations to symbolize life over death. The Romans marked the solstice with evergreen boughs in anticipation of a prosperous spring. The Druids used greens as symbols of eternal life while the Vikings believed that evergreens were the chosen trees of their sun god, Balder.

With the advent of electricity, Thomas Edison presented the possibility of twinkling tree lights

When my children were youngsters, cutting a tree was the big event of the season. We'd don our Santa hats, grab a bundle of rope to tie the tree to the top of the car, put film in the camera, and off we'd go, singing Christmas carols while plotting our adventure. It could take hours walking through a farm, checking out tree after tree, debating the merits of each. Sometimes we'd visit two or three farms before finding the perfect one. Afterwards, at home with our freshly cut treasure, we'd light a fire, drink hot cocoa and eggnog, eat persimmon pudding and Italian panetone, put on the Christmas music, and dance around the house as we spruced the fir with popcorn and cranberry strings, homemade ornaments, tinsel, and of course, plenty of twinkling lights.

One day my son had the bright idea that we should grow our own Christmas trees in order to have a never-ending supply of Yuletide enchantment. With the best planting season for evergreens between January and March, as soon as the small containers of conifers went on sale for \$1 post holiday, we nabbed 20 for our forthcoming Christmas tree farm. We chose a prime spot at the top of our hill, prepared the plot, cleared the

without as much fire danger from branch-tied candles. Europeans preferred small trees of 4 feet; Americans sought plants that would reach the ceiling. Decorations in the early days included strands of nuts, berries, apples, and popcorn. Today, a fortune can be spent on accessories and unique ornaments fit for a king from hand-carved Nativity scenes to hand-blown glass angels.

When to buy, cut, and trim the tree varies from country to country. Many American families get into the December spirit immediately following Thanksgiving while many Europeans wait until Christmas Eve to launch their rituals. Evergreen garlands, boughs, ivy, mistletoe, wreaths, poinsettias, and holly join the enticing kitchen aromas of gingerbread, marzipan, and hot mulled wine, making our Christmas castles merry and bright.

Grown in all 50 states, Christmas tree farming is big business, although it is mostly small farmers who do the growing, planting as many as 2,000 trees per acre. Seventy-seven million trees are planted annually as American consumers purchase approximately 30 million farm grown trees valued at more than \$1 billion. Fresh trees (to me the only way to play) outsell artificial trees three to one. Young families who are starting their own traditions often prefer to "cut their own" at a Christmas tree farm, enjoying a day in search of the perfect tannenbaum, as our family did in years past.

As you banish the blues with the greens of a pine, fir, spruce, redwood, cedar, or cypress, you'll be rewarded with the fresh fragrance of the wild woods. Remember to keep your cut tree watered as most farmed trees are chopped down in October or early November, then trucked to the retailer. While they won't dry out outdoors, once indoors, your specimen will need a quart to a gallon of water per day depending on the size.

This year, whether your tree was grown on a plantation or in your backyard, bring the botanical brilliance of a live tree into your seasonal festivities and celebrate the magic.

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,

Your branches green delight us!

Wishing you seasonal sparkle; glow forth and enjoy being home for the holidays.



Tagged and wired Christmas trees fill a garden center.



Decorating a winter garden as a Christmas wonderland.



Trees are wrapped in wire for transit, then added to stands at the lots.



A bright red poinsettia will always signal the holidays.

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