



Media Release

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The Great Christmas Tree Debate

If your home is a typical one, more likely than not the great Christmas tree debate has taken place at least once in your family. Is it better for the environment to use an artificial Christmas tree or a natural Christmas tree? Unfortunately, the most appropriate choice is not always the most obvious. The myriad details to track in making any environmentally wise purchasing decision can be daunting for consumers who want to make an eco-friendly choice. To help settle the great Christmas tree debate once and for all, the Recycling Council of B.C. has pulled together the salient environmental facts on real versus artificial Christmas trees.

To make an informed purchasing decision, it is necessary to consider the impact at each of the life stages (i.e. production, use by consumer and disposal) for both types of tree. Some key questions to consider include: which raw materials are used in producing the product? How much energy is consumed in production and transport? How much air and water is polluted as a result of production and transport? What becomes of the tree when the consumer is finished with it?

Here is a side-by-side pro and con comparison:

ARTIFICIAL TREE

Production:

- Most produced abroad (China, Taiwan, South Korea) where they have less stringent or no environmental regulations, poorer working conditions and lower wages
- Most artificial trees will travel thousands of kilometers before reaching Canadian consumers, requiring the burning of fossil fuel which causes air pollution, smog, acid rain and increasing numbers of deaths from ship engine emissions
- Oil is the main ingredient in plastic trees
- Fossil fuels are a non-renewable resource

Consumer Use:

- On average, an artificial tree will last 7–10 years
- PVC (vinyl) contains phthalates, which accumulate in body tissues and can damage liver, lungs and reproductive organs

Disposal:

- Cannot be recycled and so must be landfilled or incinerated (this is because the plastic and metal cannot be separated, making the trees unfit for recycling)
- If landfilled, materials will not break down
- Incineration can release dioxins and other carcinogens into the air which can pose health risks

REAL TREE

Production:

- If grown in Canada it supports local economy – 5 to 6 million Christmas trees are grown each year in Canada, providing year-round and seasonal employment
- In plantations, shrubs are commonly controlled by mowing, though some herbicides may be used to prepare the site for planting
- Improper use of pesticides can have potential health risks and implications for water quality, aquatic fauna and wildlife
- Every acre of Christmas trees grown provides daily oxygen for 18 people
- Tree-farms support complex eco-systems
- Tree roots stabilize soil, protecting water sources from sedimentation
- Trees sequester carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, from the air
- Real trees tend to travel relatively short distances to reach the consumer

Consumer Use:

- Unless purchasing a live tree, a real tree is used for one season only
- Allowing a tree to dry out is a potential fire hazard
- Tradition plays a large part in the choice of a real tree (i.e. choosing the perfect tree, the aroma in the house, etc.)

Disposal:

- Real Christmas trees are recyclable and biodegradable
- Christmas tree recycling programs are offered after the holidays in most municipalities (either pick-up or curbside collection), often supporting local charities
- Trees trunks and branches can be used as mulch for gardens and parks. The mulch provides protective barrier for the roots of other plants and vegetation which prevents weeds from growing. The mulch then decomposes, providing the nutrients plants need.

The Recycling Council of British Columbia is a multi-sectoral non-profit organization promoting the principles of Zero Waste through information services, the exchange of ideas, and research. Businesses, governments, non-profit-organizations and concerned citizens from across B.C. make up our diverse membership.

Founded in 1974, RCBC is Canada's longest-serving recycling council and has earned the reputation of being one of the most widely respected multi-sectoral environmental organizations in the province today. RCBC has played a major role in the establishment of the many groundbreaking product stewardship programs in the province, which are emulated around the world. Further information can be accessed at www.rcbc.bc.ca or by calling the RCBC Recycling Hotline at 604RECYCLE or 1-800-667-4321.