



The Great Christmas Tree Debate

Each holiday season green-minded families are faced with a decision: which is better for the environment — a reusable artificial Christmas tree or a live Christmas tree? Unfortunately, the most appropriate choice is not always obvious and can be confusing to consumers who want the most eco-friendly option. The Recycling Council of BC has pulled together the facts help BC consumers make the best choice.



To make an informed decision, it is necessary to consider the impact of each stage of a tree's life (i.e. production, use by consumer, and disposal). Some key questions to consider include: which raw materials are used in producing the product? How much energy is consumed in production and transport of each type of tree? 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 of both options:

Artificial Tree



Real Tree

Production:

- Most are produced abroad (China, Taiwan, South Korea) where they have less stringent environmental regulations, poorer working conditions and lower wages
- Most artificial trees will travel thousands of kilometres before reaching Canadian consumers, requiring the burning of fossil fuels which causes air pollution, smog and acid rain
- The main ingredient in plastic trees is oil - a fossil fuel and non-renewable resource

Consumer Use:

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

Disposal:

- Because they are made of plastic and metal that cannot be separated, they cannot be recycled and must therefore be landfilled or incinerated
- If landfilled, materials will not break down, and incineration can release dioxins and other carcinogens into the air which can pose health risks



Production:

- BC produces over 900,000 trees every year, supporting the local economy and providing year-round and seasonal employment. There are about 450 growers in BC—200 in the Kootenay area, 50 in the Okanagan and Thompson areas, and 200 on Vancouver Island and in the Fraser Valley
- Every acre of Christmas trees grown provides daily oxygen for 18 people
- Tree-farms support complex ecosystems: tree roots stabilize soil protecting water sources from sedimentation, and trees sequester carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, from the air
- Real trees tend to travel relatively short distances to reach the consumer, meaning less emissions from transportation

Consumer Use:

- Unless purchasing a potted tree, a real tree is used for one season
- 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 compostable and biodegradable
- Christmas tree recycling programs are offered after the holidays in most municipalities (either drop-off or curbside collection), often supporting local charities
- Composted trees can be used as mulch for gardens and parks. The mulch provides a protective barrier for the roots of other plants and vegetation and as it decomposes it provides nutrients plants need.

So what would the Recycling Council of British Columbia recommend as the most eco-friendly option?

If you've got the space for it, the most eco-friendly solution is to get a live tree that you can plant in your yard or keep in a pot. Remember that proper care is essential if you want your tree to survive past the Christmas season! Ask the nursery where you purchase your tree for care advice. Have nowhere to replant your tree? A growing trend is to "rent" a potted tree from a nursery. There are a few nurseries in BC already providing this service: www.carbonsync.ca or www.evergrowchristmastrees.ca/trees.htm

Recycling Council of British Columbia - www.rcbc.bc.ca

Need more information? Visit our website for Christmas tree chipping events, holiday light recycling, curbside service interruptions and the answers to all your holiday recycling questions!

Recycling Hotline: 604-RECYCLE (732-9253) or 1-800-667-4321, or email us at hotline@rcbc.bc.ca

