

# The Christmas Tree Debate



Each holiday season consumers are faced with a decision: which is better — a reusable artificial Christmas tree or live cut Christmas tree? 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 season is done? 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 and poorer working conditions
- 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. Several known carcinogens, including dioxin, ethylene dichloride and vinyl chloride, are generated during the production of PVC (vinyl) polluting neighborhoods located near factory sites.

### 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
- Artificial trees are known to contain lead

### Disposal:

- Because they are made of plastic and metal which are difficult to separate during the recycling process, recycling companies will not accept them and they end up in landfills where they do not biodegrade.
- Incinerating plastics 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. The real tree also absorbs carbon dioxide while it grows, doing its bit to fight global warming.
- 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 fewer emissions from transportation

### Consumer Use:

- Unless purchasing a potted tree, a real tree is used for one season only
- Tradition plays a large part in the choice of a real tree (i.e. choosing the perfect tree, aroma in the home, etc.)
- Improperly cared-for trees can dry up and pose a fire risk

### Disposal:

- Real Christmas trees are compostable and biodegradable
- Christmas tree recycling programs are offered after the holidays in most municipalities, often supporting local charities
- Composted trees can be used as mulch for gardens

**So what would the Recycling Council of British Columbia recommend as the most eco-friendly option? If the choice is between a plastic reusable tree or a live cut tree, the choice is obviously a live cut tree.**

**However, there is another option and that is the LIVE POTTED TREE!**

**Read on for information on potted trees, including purchasing options and live-tree care information.**

# LIVE CHRISTMAS TREE GUIDE

## Purchasing a Potted Christmas Tree:

Buying a living Christmas tree is becoming a popular choice for environmentally-conscious consumers. After decorating it for the holidays, you can plant in your yard, or donate it to a plant-a-tree organization. But to make sure that the tree will thrive in your home and for years to come outside, it's important to choose a healthy, properly potted tree. Be sure to choose native species as they will thrive in local conditions.



## Tree Handling and Care:

- Living Christmas trees are unique and should receive special care. Since the root balls are often heavy and cumbersome, it is important that they are not mistreated or dropped. Balled and burlapped trees should not be carried by their stems, because the weight of the root ball can exert pressure on the roots and break them. It is best to pick the tree up by the ball itself or to roll the ball along the ground.
- Once the tree is home, it should be conditioned by leaving the tree upright in an unheated garage for a couple of days. After the conditioning, the tree can be brought indoors and placed in a cool location away from direct sunlight. It is important that the location be away from heat sources such as wood stoves, fireplaces, heater vents, etc.
- Living Christmas trees will also need water, although not nearly as much as cut trees. Prior to moving the tree inside, the root ball should be moistened and kept in a moist condition while the tree is displayed. The root ball should be placed in a bucket or a large pan to prevent soil and water from staining the floor.
- Living Christmas trees are fairly sensitive and should not be kept inside for more than 10 days. Exposure to the warm temperatures may cause the dormant tree to break buds and start to grow, and of course this is undesirable. Before removing the tree directly outside, it should be allowed to recondition in the same manner as when it was brought inside. After a couple of days, it should be ready to plant outside.

## Tree Rentals:

- Another option that has become more popular in the past few years is Christmas tree rentals. There are some local companies that provide this service. For a fee, companies will drop off an evergreen at your door and then pick it up at the end of the holiday season. The following companies provide rental services for potted Christmas trees:

**Evergrow Christmas Trees Co.**, Burnaby <http://evergrowchristmastrees.ca/>  
**Carbonsync**, Squamish <http://carbonsync.ca/>



**Recycling Council of British Columbia** - [www.rcbc.bc.ca](http://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](mailto:hotline@rcbc.bc.ca)