

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the week
By Jann Dworsky
Norfolk Island Pine

When I was a kid I loved decorating Mama's Norfolk Island pine for Christmas but last year when I tried to buy one I it was a lesson in futility. There were none to be found in Central Texas. They had been everywhere before Christmas and I thought I would wait until the holidays calmed down to buy a new large plant. After Christmas I could not find one anywhere!

This year I was not going to let my opportunity escape and bought a lovely three-foot tall Norfolk Island pine sapling a few weeks before Thanksgiving. My husband helped me wag it home safely and it is resting comfortably by 3 large living room windows. It will get about 2 hours of early morning sun and then bright light the remainder of the day.

These charming trees do come from Norfolk Island, as you would have guessed, and I was surprised to learn that this island is located between New Caledonia and New Zealand. I had always imagined Norfolk Island to be in eastern Canada, but I was a mere 8,000 miles off. Floridata.com tells us that descendants of mutineers from the H.M.S. Bounty first inhabited Norfolk Island, only 3 by 5 miles long. It is a lovely sub-tropical island and the seamen chose wisely.

On Norfolk Island, in full sun, they sometimes reach 200 feet tall and have 15 pound pine cones! We are able to keep ours indoors and small for years because this imitates the environment of their native forest floor, where saplings sprout, have low light and grow very slowly for many years.

Norfolk Island Pine, or *araucaria heterophylla* is not a true pine, but a southern hemisphere conifer. It is hardy in the USA only in California and the southern tip of Florida (Zone 11). It should be kept indoors in Central Texas at a temperature between 45 degrees and 90 degrees. Keep your conifer in a pot that drains well, with a tray under it and water it thoroughly every week. Don't allow temperatures out of this range or standing in water, it causes terminal leaf death; they do not re-sprout.

These little trees have become very popular as live indoor Christmas trees and tiny ornaments or bows do not damage the limbs. The University of Florida (Poole, Osborne and Chase) advises to put the tree by a window with full sun for a strong trunk and light to medium green color, but a plant grown in shade will have a weaker trunk and gracefully drooping dark green foliage. Your location choice will determine its growth patterns.

According to Steve Nix's website (forestry.about.com) some lower branches may turn brown and need to be removed as the pine grows, otherwise any other pruning will cause death of that tip or branch with no new re-growth. They only require mild fertilization every few months and like to be kept root bound. Re-potting is necessary only every 3-4 years.

Once you have chosen a good bright location for your Norfolk Island pine you will have a small tree that needs little care and provides a beautiful living addition to your home. Merry Christmas and enjoy! Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com

