

## **Recycling Christmas Trees: A Gift to Nature**

by Candace Mullen, Bell County Master Gardener

I am not going to get into the debate about "real" Christmas trees and the value of either one. I think it is a personal preference and a decision that your family has to make. But my personal solution is to have several trees and satisfy everyone by having both kinds! I guess that you can tell my favorite holiday is of course, Christmas. There is just something about the fragrance of a real tree that brings back the memories of growing up in Wisconsin to be savored. Of course, having an artificial tree lets you decorate earlier and keep the tree up longer.

This article will give you several solutions to disposing of a real tree if you have gone that route. I am not talking about putting it out on the curb and letting the garbage truck take it away! Don't you think that is such a sad sight? Well, here are some solutions for you and your family to try. It will help the environment and teach your kids about recycling and a little about nature at the same time.

One of the easiest solutions is to take all the ornaments off the tree, take it out side and set it upright in the garden, away from the buildings. It will provide shelter and protection for birds through the winter. But even better, you can redecorate that tree outside! Turn it into an instant bird feeder and your children can watch the birds and not drive you crazy on the holiday break! Just thread orange slices with yarn, pack pine cones with peanut butter, hang balls of suet (get this from the meat department) and bird- seed on the branches. Plain cookies are also a treat and if the birds get them, you won't! You can also add ropes of strung popcorn and cranberries to make it look pretty and for the creatures to nibble. If your soil is alkaline, the falling needles will lower the soil pH, which will help the strawberry beds, bulbs, and perennials, especially on clay soil. The flowering bulbs get super vivid colors as a result.

Of course, you could cut the branches off and use them as cover for the beds for the winter. Then you can use the trunk in the spring as a support for your climbing plants such as cucumbers, pole beans, squash, morning glory, gourds or anything else that climbs. If you have several trunks, get those from others not wise enough to recycle, use them to form a teepee tied at the top. Plant your climbing plants at the base and the kids have an instant playhouse all summer long that is green and fun! Try planting pumpkins on one of these, way cool.

You could use your tree for firewood and enjoy it all over again watching the flames in the fireplace. Just remember that pines burn hot and fast, and the resin will bubble and pop so watch for the sparks. Cut the tree into appropriate lengths after taking off the branches and stack them under a waterproof tarp, allowing for good air circulation and proper drying.

If you have a little property and room, you could use the tree as a shelter for small mammals. Put the tree on its side in the woods, but select the site carefully. It should be considered a permanent site not to be disturbed later. You don't want to be accused of dumping and you don't want to encourage wildlife to take up residence where they will become a nuisance later. That defeats the purpose.

Are you a fisherman? Do you know anyone who has a good-sized pond or lake? The tree can be used quite effectively as a comfort zone for fish and a lucky spot for anglers. Using Christmas trees as habitat enhancers is an old trick that has gained newfound popularity. When the trees are grouped and placed correctly in a pond or lake, they create shade and hiding spots for fish. The grouped trees serve the same purpose as shade trees in the summer for cattle - fish will be grouped around these spots. To create the spot, tie several trees together in loose groups of two to four for best results. Be sure all tinsel, hooks, and ornaments are removed. The trees should be weighted so they will stay in place; Tie the weights on or set the trees in a bucket of cement. Place these bundles in 3 to 10 feet of water. Use several at different depths if the pond is large enough to attract fish in all seasons. Limit the number to one or two per acre of water.

Use the buddy system to place the trees for safety's sake. You can even mark the spot with a buoy. Now sit back and have fun at that lucky fishing spot this summer.

On a larger scale, some states, like Louisiana collect and use trees to restore land and habitats. They help

restore coastal marshes and help protect from erosion. Louisiana places them in fenced areas to enhance sedimentation and prevent salt-water intrusion. Over 60,000 trees have been placed in the Louisiana marsh in fenced corrals spanning over 45,000 feet so far.

You can also save the needles to create potpourri. Dry the branches, then remove and crumble the needles. Mix the needles with cinnamon sticks, whole cloves, allspice, and Christmas scent. Placed in sealed jars to store and enjoy next year or give as creative gifts. To create a pleasant Christmas scent, add one cup of water to ¼ cup potpourri and heat in on the stove in a pot or in a potpourri heater. Do you know how expensive it is to buy this stuff? Go ahead, try making your own.

Of course, the last suggestion for that Christmas tree is to turn it into mulch. If you have your own chipper that's pretty simple. If you don't, check with your city office and they will surely have a program in place. They will give you the time and the place to take that tree and you will come away with some good stuff for your garden and flowerbeds. Also watch the newspapers for times and places. Just make sure that all ornaments and decorations are removed first.

I know that with all these solutions of what to do with the Christmas tree everyone can find one that will fit their family. So if you see that sad tree put out for the garbage, snatch it up and help out our world, just a little bit. It will make your heart feel good and start 2005 out the right way. Happy New Year!